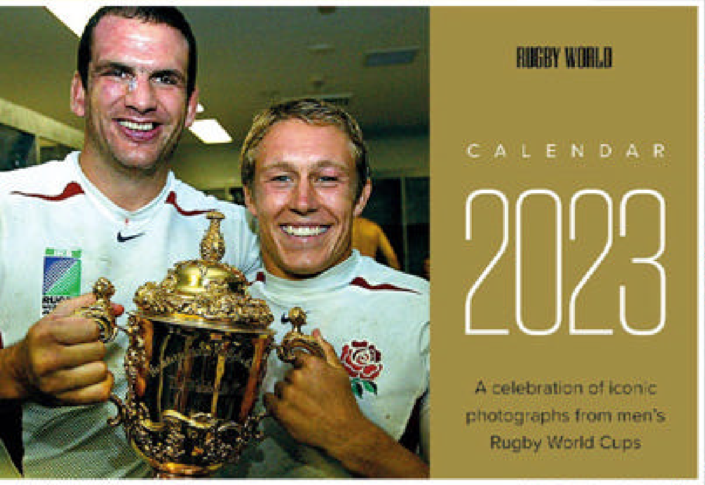
RUGBY WORLD®

FREE CALENDAR



RUGBY WORLD

CALENDAR

2023

A celebration of iconic photographs from men's Rugby World Cups

Iconic photos from men's World Cups & all the key fixture dates

RUGBY WORLD CUP 2022: THE VERDICT

//

THE RISE OF LA ROCHELLE

ISSUE
JANUARY
2023

FUTURE

CHAMPIONS CUP

EUROPE IS BACK!

New-look format for 2022-23

PLUS ZACH MERCER // ROB DU PREEZ // MUNSTER // ALEX CUTHBERT // BEN LOADER

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WHAT YOU SHOULD BE TALKING ABOUT THIS MONTH…

“Toxic discourse around officiating must stop”

Record breaker Wayne Barnes has now refereed 101 Tests

PIC Getty Images

THERE IS so much grey in the lawbook that decisions will always be debated, but the constant commentary around refereeing has become toxic and may put people off taking up the whistle.

Joy Neville speaks in this issue (P58) about social media being used as a “weapon” to criticise officials and certainly those taking charge of big matches are being subjected to increasing levels of vitriol.

Rassie Erasmus has regularly posted on Twitter highlighting incidents in South Africa Tests, the sarcasm not so subtle as he points at perceived injustices. To do this while in a high-profile role makes others believe they have a licence to do the same.

There is already a process for coaches to raise issues with match officials and doing it in such a public forum does no one any good. Especially when presenting just one team’s views.

Take all the commentary around the France-South Africa Test in November, which resulted in World Rugby slapping Erasmus with a two-match ban (and quite right too). Erasmus and Springboks fans may have felt aggrieved by some of the decisions made by referee Wayne Barnes, but no doubt the France camp would also have been able to source various clips of South African infringements that weren’t penalised.

That is the reality of a game of rugby – so much is going on and at such a speed that sometimes things will be missed, or decisions will not go your team’s way. Something that seems obvious in a clip 24 hours later may not have been so clear from the angle the ref was viewing it at in a split-second.

Referees are human beings and will never give a perfect performance. So let’s stop the toxic discourse around officiating. Or we may soon have a shortage of officials, without whom there are no matches. RW

STEPHEN JONES THIS MONTH

“With the long distances for European games, teams may decide to concentrate on domestic leagues and not send their finest” **P60**

HAVE YOUR SAY

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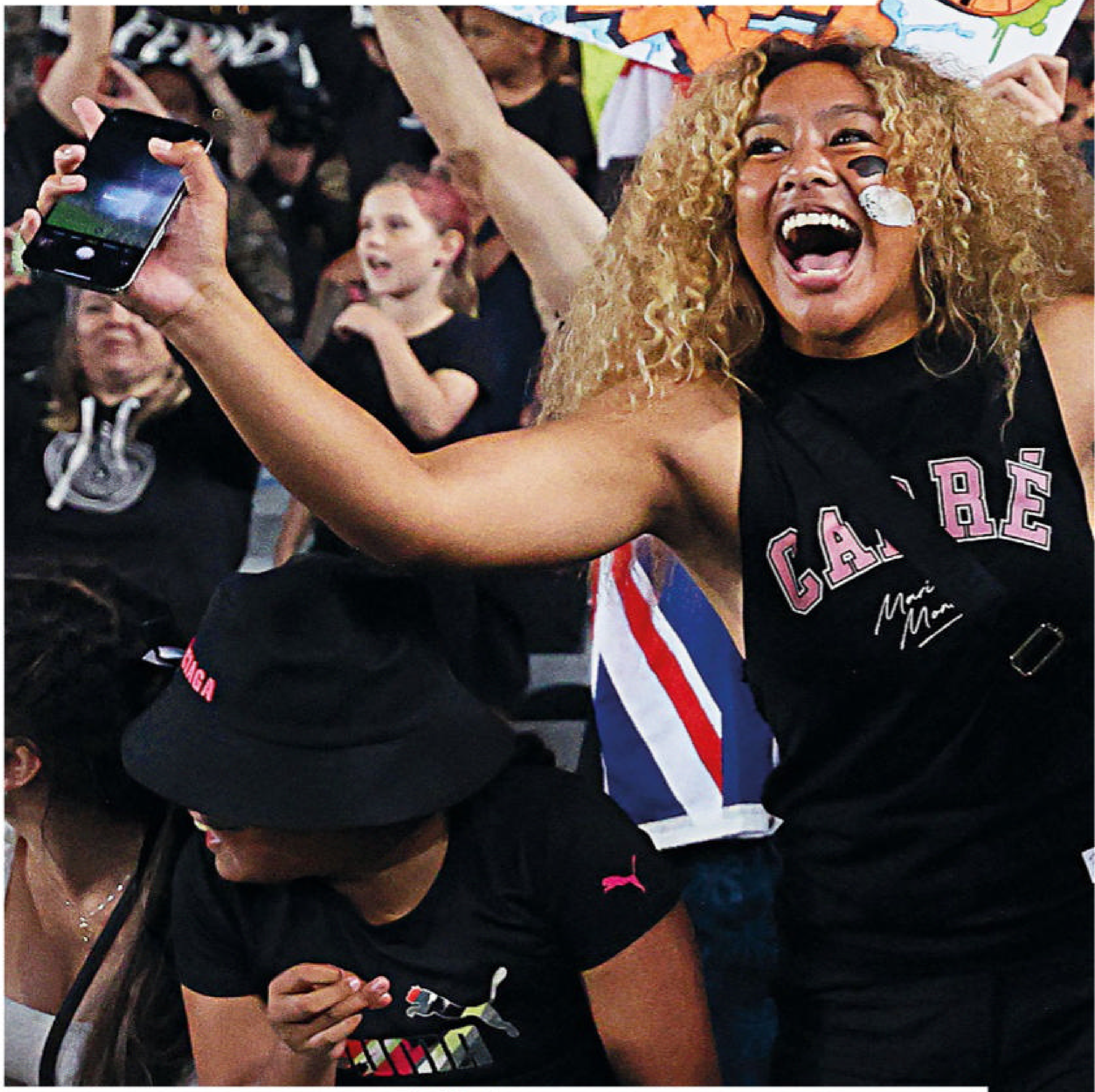

DON'T MISS THIS MONTH

How Munster are backing young, local players to revive the team after a decade of frustration. P66-69

FESTIVE OFFER!

Christmas shopping sorted! If you subscribe to *Rugby World* this month you'll get a FREE pair of Boompods Sportpods TWS worth £50 – treat yourself or friends and family. Turn to P32-33 or call 0330 333 1113 and quote code X495.

RUGBY WORLD
CHAMPIONS!

COVER PHOTO Phil Walter/Getty Images. **PICS** Getty Images & Inpho

Ready to roar
Fans celebrate the Black Ferns' World Cup triumph

EDITOR'S LETTER

"Rugby must now build on this momentum"

SPENDING SIX weeks in New Zealand at the World Cup, I was able to see how the country embraced women's rugby – and captured a new, younger audience.

Rugby's decision-makers have long been banging the drum about 'growing the game' and this tournament has done that, but the sport can't stand still, it must seize the moment. See P34-41.

Now for some personal news. After 20 years at *Rugby World*, this is my final issue. It's been a privilege to be involved in this brand for a third of its lifespan and I'd like to thank all the colleagues, players, coaches and so on I have worked with in that time, but most especially you, the readers.

After all, we want to produce content that is both informative and entertaining, that you enjoy reading, and I'm certain RW will continue to do that.

Sarah Mockford

Sarah Mockford, Editor
Email: sarah.mockford@futurenet.com
Twitter: @SarahJMockford

SCAN TO GET RUGBY WORLD'S NEWSLETTER

GOING FOR A SPIN

Mack Hansen is lifted in the combined tackle of Jiuta Wainiqolo and Waisea Nayacalevu during Ireland's 35-17 win against Fiji at the Aviva Stadium

Picture **Tom Maher/Inpho**

SPORT

TECH

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YOUR RUGBY CALENDAR

A look at oval-ball events happening in December

12th

Steve Thompson's documentary – *Head On: Rugby, Dementia and Me* – first aired in October but it's still available on BBC iPlayer. If you have a spare hour this month, it's well worth watching to get an insight into how life has changed for the former England hooker (below).

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

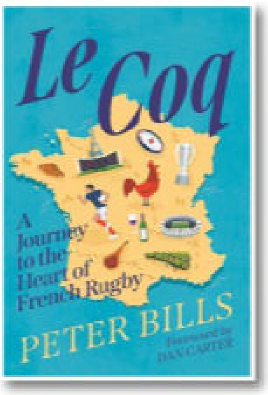
9th

The Champions Cup gets underway this Friday night in Brentford as London Irish take on Montpellier. It could be a fascinating contest under the lights between the power of Montpellier and the free-running game of the Exiles. This year sees teams from the southern hemisphere join the European competition for the first time, with three South African franchises involved. Read Stephen Jones's verdict on their addition on pages 60-63.

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
28	29	30	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9 🏆	10	11
12 📺	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20 🎫	21	22	23	24	25
26 🏉	27th NEW ISSUE OUT	28	29 📖	30	31	1
2	3	4	5	6	9	18

20th

Big Game is back at Twickenham for its 14th incarnation a week today on bank holiday Tuesday, 27th December. It's a double header of Harlequins v Bristol men's and women's fixtures. Plus, there will be a musical performance from Faithless between games. Get tickets from eticketing.co.uk/harlequins



26th

Boxing Day brings not only festive leftovers but a brilliant interprovincial match in the URC. Munster host Leinster at Thomond Park in an evening kick-off this Monday and they'll be looking to avenge the 27-13 loss at the Aviva Stadium in October (right). You can watch it on Premier Sports and TG4.

29th

With the 2023 World Cup edging ever closer, you may want to get a better understanding of rugby in France. *Le Coq* features interviews with some of the biggest names to have played in France, from Dan Carter to Serge Blanco. The book is released in five weeks' time (2 Feb), so pre-order from amazon.co.uk

THE DIRECTORY

All the fixtures and TV details you need leading up to the festive season and beyond

FRIDAY 25 NOVEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Harlequins v Gloucester (7.45pm)
Newcastle v Exeter (7.45pm)
United Rugby Championship
Stormers v Scarlets (5pm)
TV Live on Premier, BBC W & TG4
Ulster v Zebre Parma (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier BBC NI & TG4

SATURDAY 26 NOVEMBER
Autumn Internationals
Wales v Australia
(3.15pm, Principality Stadium)
England v South Africa
(5.30pm, Principality Stadium)
TV Both live on Amazon Prime
Autumn Friendly
Northampton v Barbarians (3pm)
Gallagher Premiership
Sale v Bristol (1pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Bulls v Ospreys (1pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & S4C
Benetton v Edinburgh (1pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports
Leinster v Glasgow (3.15pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & RTÉ
Munster v Connacht (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & TG4
Allianz Premier 15s
DMP Sharks v Exeter (noon)
Glos-Hartpury v Bristol (12.30pm)
Top 14
La Rochelle v Castres
Montpellier v Bayonne
Pau v Brive
Perpignan v Bordeaux-Bègles
Stade Français v Toulon
Tennent's Men's Premiership
Edinburgh Accies v Currie
GHA v Glasgow Hawks
Heriot's v Marr
Jed-Forest v Selkirk
Musselburgh v Hawick
Tennent's Women's Premiership
Cartha Queens Park v Heriot's
Energia Men's AIL 1A
Ballynahinch v Cork Con
Clontarf v Terenure College
Dublin Uni v Young Munster
Lansdowne v Garryowen
Shannon v UCD

SUNDAY 27 NOVEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Leicester v London Irish (3pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Lions v Dragons (2pm)
Sharks v Cardiff (4.10pm)
TV Both live on Premier & S4C
Allianz Premier 15s
Worcester v Sale (1pm)
Loughborough v Harlequins (2)
Saracens v Wasps (3.15pm)
Top 14
Lyon v Toulouse
Racing 92 v Clermont
Tennent's Women's Premiership
Garioch v Watsonians
Hillhead-Jordanhill v Corstorphine

WEEKEND 2-4 DECEMBER
World Sevens Series
(Men & Women – Dubai)

FRIDAY 2 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Bath v Harlequins (7.45pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Sharks v Ospreys (5.10pm)
TV Live on Premier, BBC W & TG4
Edinburgh v Munster (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & TG4

SATURDAY 3 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
London Irish v Newcastle (3pm)
Gloucester v Northampton (5.30)
TV Live on BT Sport
Bristol v Leicester (8pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Stormers v Dragons (noon)
TV Live on Premier Sports & S4C
Zebre Parma v Glasgow (1pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports
Connacht v Edinburgh (3.15pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & RTÉ
Bulls v Cardiff (6pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & S4C
Leinster v Ulster (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & TG4
Allianz Premier 15s
Bristol v DMP Sharks (11.30am)
Wasps v Glos-Hartpury (1.30pm)
Harlequins v Saracens (2pm)
Sale v Loughborough (2pm)
Exeter v Worcester (3pm)
Top 14
Bayonne v Lyon
Bordeaux-Bègles v Brive
Clermont v Montpellier
Stade Français v La Rochelle
Toulouse v Perpignan
RFU Championship
Ampthill v Hartpury
Bedford v Nottingham
Cornish Pirates v Ealing
Coventry v Doncaster
Jersey v Richmond
London Scottish v Caldy
Tennent's Men's Premiership
Currie v Heriot's
Glasgow Hawks v Jed-Forest
Hawick v Edinburgh Accies
Marr v GHA
Selkirk v Musselburgh
Tennent's Women's Premiership
Heriot's v Stirling County
Watsonians v Hillhead-Jordanhill
Energia Men's AIL 1A
Cork Constitution v Clontarf
Garryowen v Ballynahinch
Shannon v Young Munster
Terenure College v Dublin Uni
UCD v Lansdowne

SUNDAY 4 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Wasps v Sale (3pm) *
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Lions v Scarlets (11.30am)
TV Live on Premier Sports & S4C
Top 14
Castres v Pau
Toulon v Racing 92
Tennent's Women's Premiership
Corstorphine v Cartha Queens Pk

THURSDAY 8 DECEMBER
Indigo Group Premiership
Aberavon v Cardiff

WEEKEND 9-11 DECEMBER
World Sevens Series
(Men & Women – Cape Town)

FRIDAY 9 DECEMBER
Champions Cup
London Irish v Montpellier (8pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
Challenge Cup
Perpignan v Bristol (8pm)
Stade Français v Benetton (8pm)
RFU Championship
Nottingham v Jersey

SATURDAY 10 DECEMBER
Champions Cup
Racing 92 v Leinster (1pm)
Sharks v Harlequins (1pm)
Clermont v Stormers (3.15pm)
Gloucester v Bordeaux (3.15pm)
Bulls v Lyon (5.30pm)
La Rochelle v Northampton (5.30)
Castres v Exeter (8pm)
TV All live on BT Sport
Challenge Cup
Lions v Dragons (12.45pm)
Bath v Glasgow (1pm)
Pau v Cheetahs (1pm)
Cardiff v Brive (5.30pm)
TV Live on S4C
Connacht v Newcastle (5.30pm)
Zebre v Toulon (8pm)
Allianz Premier 15s
Loughborough v Exeter (12.30pm)
DMP Sharks v Wasps (1pm)
Worcester v Bristol (1pm)
Harlequins v Sale (1.30pm)
Saracens v Glos-Hartpury (2.30)
RFU Championship
Caldy v Cornish Pirates
Doncaster v London Scottish
Ealing v Bedford
Hartpury v Coventry
Richmond v Ampthill
Indigo Group Premiership
Bridgend v Llanelli
Merthyr v Newport
Pontypridd v Ebbw Vale
RGC v Carmarthen Quins
Swansea v Llandovery
Tennent's Men's Premiership
Edinburgh Accies v Selkirk
GHA v Currie
Heriot's v Hawick
Marr v Glasgow Hawks
Musselburgh v Jed-Forest
Energia Men's AIL 1A
Ballynahinch v UCD
Clontarf v Garryowen
Dublin University v Cork Con
Lansdowne v Shannon
Young Munster v Terenure Coll

SUNDAY 11 DECEMBER
Champions Cup
Sale v Ulster (1pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
Munster v Toulouse (3.15pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & RTÉ
Saracens v Edinburgh (3.15pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & ITV
Ospreys v Leicester (5.30pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & S4C
Challenge Cup
Scarlets v Bayonne (3.15pm)
Tennent's Women's Premiership
Corstorphine v Stirling County
Heriot's v Garioch
Hillhead-Jordanhill v Cartha QP

THURSDAY 15 DECEMBER
Indigo Group Premiership
Llandovery v Aberavon

FRIDAY 16 DECEMBER
Champions Cup
Bordeaux-Bègles v Sharks (8pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
Leinster v Gloucester (8pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & RTÉ
Challenge Cup
Lions v Stade Français (7.30pm)
Brive v Connacht (8pm)
Glasgow v Perpignan (8pm)

SATURDAY 17 DECEMBER

11th
CLOSE CALL
Munster v Toulouse in last season's quarter-finals, the French side won after a penalty shootout. Will this pool match have the same drama?

PICS Getty Images

1st

CORNER STOP

Quins' Cadan Murley scores against Northampton earlier in the season – the two sides meet again on New Year's Day

Champions Cup
Edinburgh v Castres (1pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
Exeter v Bulls (1pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & ITV
Leicester v Clermont (3.15pm)
Lyon v Saracens (3.15pm)
Stormers v London Irish (5.30pm)
Ulster v La Rochelle (5.30pm)
TV All live on BT Sport
Montpellier v Ospreys (8pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & S4C
Challenge Cup
Toulon v Bath (1pm)
Cheetahs v Scarlets (3.15pm)
Bayonne v Benetton (5.30pm)
Dragons v Pau (5.30pm)
TV Live on S4C
Newcastle v Cardiff (5.30pm)
Allianz Premier 15s
Wasps v Worcester (1.30pm)
Glos-Hartpury v DMP Sharks (2)
Sale v Saracens (2pm)
Bristol v Loughborough (2.30pm)
RFU Championship
Ampthill v Nottingham
Caldy v Ealing
Coventry v Richmond
Jersey v Bedford
London Scottish v Hartpury
Indigo Group Premiership
Bridgend v Swansea
Cardiff v Carmarthen Quins
Ebbw Vale v Merthyr
Newport v Llanelli
RGC v Pontypridd
Tennent's Men's Premiership
Currie v Marr
Glasgow Hawks v Musselburgh
Hawick v GHA
Jed-Forest v Edinburgh Accies
Selkirk v Heriot's
SUNDAY 18 DECEMBER
Champions Cup
Northampton v Munster (1pm)
Toulouse v Sale (1pm)
Harlequins v Racing 92 (5.30pm)
TV All live on BT Sport
Challenge Cup
Bristol v Zebre (1pm)
Allianz Premier 15s
Exeter v Harlequins (2.30pm)
RFU Championship
Cornish Pirates v Doncaster
THURSDAY 22 DECEMBER
Top 14
Toulon v Lyon
FRIDAY 23 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
London Irish v Saracens (7.45pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
Newcastle v Sale (7.45pm)
United Rugby Championship
Sharks v Lions (3pm)
Stormers v Bulls (3pm)
TV Both live on Premier Sports
Connacht v Ulster (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & RTÉ
Glasgow v Edinburgh (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports
Top 14
Brive v Clermont
La Rochelle v Bordeaux-Bègles
Montpellier v Perpignan
Pau v Bayonne
Toulouse v Castres
RFU Championship
Hartpury v Cornish Pirates
SATURDAY 24 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Exeter v Bath (3pm)
Leicester v Gloucester (3pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Benetton v Zebre Parma (12.30)
TV Live on Premier Sports
Top 14
Racing v Stade Français
RFU Championship
Ealing v Jersey
MONDAY 26 DECEMBER
United Rugby Championship
Dragons v Cardiff (2.15pm)
TV Live on Premier & BBC W
Ospreys v Scarlets (5.15pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & S4C
Munster v Leinster (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & TG4
RFU Championship
Bedford v Ampthill
Doncaster v Caldy
Nottingham v Coventry
Indigo Group Premiership
Bridgend v Aberavon
Cardiff v Pontypridd
Ebbw Vale v Newport
Llandovery v Carmarthen Quins
Swansea v Llanelli
TUESDAY 27 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Harlequins v Bristol
(4.15pm, Twickenham)
TV Live on BT Sport
Allianz Premier 15s
Harlequins v Bristol (1.30, Twick)
Indigo Group Premiership
RGC v Merthyr
FRIDAY 30 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Sale v Leicester (7.45pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Edinburgh v Glasgow (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports
Top 14
Bordeaux-Bègles v Montpellier
SATURDAY 31 DECEMBER
Gallagher Premiership
Bath v Newcastle (3pm)
Gloucester v London Irish (3pm)
Saracens v Exeter (3pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Zebre Parma v Benetton (12.30)
Sharks v Bulls (2.45pm)
Stormers v Lions (5pm)
TV All live on Premier Sports
Top 14
Bayonne v Toulon
Castres v Racing
Lyon v Racing
Perpignan v La Rochelle
Stade Français v Pau
RFU Championship
Richmond v London Scottish
SUNDAY 1 JANUARY
Gallagher Premiership
Northampton v Harlequins (3pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Cardiff v Ospreys (3pm)
TV Live on Premier & BBC W
Scarlets v Dragons (5.15pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & S4C
Ulster v Munster (5.15pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & TG4
Leinster v Connacht (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & RTÉ
Top 14
Clermont v Toulouse
WEEKEND 6-8 JANUARY
Top 14
Bordeaux-Bègles v Bayonne
Brive v Toulon
Clermont v Perpignan
La Rochelle v Toulouse
Montpellier v Racing
Pau v Lyon
Stade Français v Castres
FRIDAY 6 JANUARY
Gallagher Premiership
Gloucester v Saracens (7.45pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Dragons v Bulls (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier & BBC W
Munster v Lions (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & TG4
SATURDAY 7 JANUARY
Gallagher Premiership
Newcastle v Leicester (2pm)
Exeter v Northampton (4.30pm)
TV Both live on BT Sport
United Rugby Championship
Benetton v Ulster (1pm)
Edinburgh v Zebre Parma (3pm)
Cardiff v Scarlets (5.15pm)
TV All live on Premier Sports
Connacht v Sharks (5.15pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports & RTÉ
Ospreys v Leinster (7.35pm)
TV Live on Premier, S4C & TG4
Allianz Premier 15s
Loughborough v Wasps
Sale v Exeter
Saracens v DMP Sharks
Worcester v Glos-Hartpury
Indigo Group Premiership
Aberavon v Swansea
Carmarthen Quins v Bridgend
Llanelli v Ebbw Vale
Merthyr v Cardiff
Newport v RGC
Pontypridd v Llandovery
Tennent's Men's Premiership
Currie v Glasgow Hawks
Edinburgh Accies v Musselburgh
GHA v Selkirk
Heriot's v Jed-Forest
Marr v Hawick
SUNDAY 8 JANUARY
Gallagher Premiership
Harlequins v Sale (3pm)
TV Live on BT Sport
London Irish v Bristol (3pm)
United Rugby Championship
Glasgow v Stormers (3pm)
TV Live on Premier Sports

● *All kick-offs UK & Ireland. Fixtures subject to change.*

DOWNTIME WITH… SADIA KABEYA

"I've got an exclusive clientele as a hairdresser"

The Red Roses flanker talks superstitions, Adele and being herself

Interview **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **Getty Images**

What's the funniest thing you've seen on the pitch? It has to be someone's pants being pulled down in a maul. And you can't really get out of a maul, you just have to keep going with your pants down. It happens to every forward at least once in a lifetime.

Who are the jokers in the squad? Definitely Hannah Botterman. She's one of the big class clowns. Also people who you wouldn't think of, like Emily Scarratt, who is always pulling a joke here and there, and Alex Matthews.

What about pranks? Sarah McKenna loves a good joke. She did a 'Scare Maze' in one of our hotels. Sarah and Jess Breach set it up – they do all the social stuff in camp. We had a long corridor near our team room and they put up cobwebs, crazy things. They told us it was a movie night but when we came down we had to line up to get in, then Jess opened the door and she had all this make-up on and put on a ghoul voice. Sarah was in a suitcase, screaming. It was a really good 'Scare Maze'. And when we did get to the team room there was a scary movie playing.

Any nicknames? I've said, 'Call me Sadia' but people still call me 'Sard' or 'SK'.

We hear you're one of the team hairdressers… I wouldn't say that! I have an exclusive clientele of three. I don't enjoy doing it as my hair takes enough time, but I do Shaunagh Brown, Ellie Kildunne and Tats (Tatyana Heard). It just used to be Shaunagh and that is transactional as she drives me everywhere back home.

Maybe you could ask for chocolate from the others… I'm a sweets girl so I could charge in Sour Patch Kids.

Any tricky clients? Ellie is the fussiest and she has a very tender head, so if there is any knot she is screaming!

Do you have any phobias? When I was younger I used to be scared of getting stuck in a lift, but that's because in my old flat the lifts got stuck all the time. I'm afraid of spiders and I don't really like heights, but I've not got any big phobias.

Who would you like to be stuck in a lift with? Definitely Adele. I'm a huge Adele fan, not just her voice but she's cool and down-to-earth. It would be good to have a chat with her. I might have to bribe her to sing a song too, or maybe a whole album.

FACT FILE

Age 20 (22 Feb 2002)
Born Lewisham
Position Back-row
Club Loughborough
Height 5ft 7in
Weight 12st 10lb
England caps Eight
Insta @sadiakabeya

WHAT'S ON YOUR PH?NE

Last person you phoned
I FaceTimed Maud Muir

Most important person in phone
Definitely my mum

Last person you texted
Emily Liles (Red Roses communications manager)

Last photo you took
Of breakfast with my mum

Favourite social network
TikTok

High standards
Kabeya was Player of the Match in England's RWC game v Fiji

Dinner guest
Singer Adele

> “We had a ‘Scare Maze’ one night. Jess Breach had all this make-up on and put on a ghoul voice”

So would you back Adele to sing at the 2025 World Cup? It has to be Adele. She can bring out *Rolling in the Deep* and some more upbeat songs. If it's not Adele I'll be disappointed.

Any superstitions? Not in rugby but in general life I won't walk over three drains or under big road signs.

Best and worst room-mates? Shaunagh is the best. We just get each other; we can sit in silence in the room and not feel like we have to make small talk. We are just very comfortable with each other and you have to be comfortable when you're away from home.

The worst has got to be with a snorer. Maud Muir is a big snorer.

If you could have one superpower, what would it be? To be invisible. So I could eavesdrop and get the gossip.

What three things would you save if your house was on fire? My phone. A picture of me and my older brother, Theo. It's a four-picture frame of me and him, and we're very close. And probably my Premier 15s Player of the Year trophy.

If you could be any of your team-mates, who would it be? Emily Scarratt. Everyone loves her. She's a great gal, great at rugby and cool.

Who would be your three dream dinner party guests? Adele, Rihanna… I feel like I'd be content with those two!

The best advice you've received? It's a cliché but to be yourself. Especially when I came into rugby and this environment. It's making sure you're yourself on the pitch and stick to your strengths, then off the pitch try not to blend into the background to fit in, keep your flair!

Guilty pleasure? TikTok. I'm a big scroller, I could scroll for hours. And napping.

Do you have any party tricks? I can still do a few flips from when I was a gymnast that I might pull out after everyone has begged me to do it!

What would you like to achieve outside of rugby? Whatever I do I'd like to stay within sport and inspire young black girls, young women of colour to play rugby or any other sport. It's being in that environment and being that voice, that person. If you can't see it, you can't be it – it's as simple as that.

How'd you like to be remembered? As being unapologetically myself. RW

Favourite music app
Spotify

Last song you played
Evergreen by YEBBA

Last app downloaded
MixCaptions, to add subtitles to a reel for Insta

2
9
1
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Words **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **Getty Images**

AROUND THE WORLD IN TEN STORIES

A round-up of news from all points of the globe

1

Georgia
The Rugby Europe Super Cup semi-finals take place on 4 December, with defending champions Black Lion (below) of Georgia taking on Spain's Castilla y Leon Iberians in Tbilisi.

In the other semi-final, Portuguese side Lusitanos will host Israel's Tel Aviv Heat in Lisbon. The final will take place on 17 December and this year there will also be a third-place play-off involving the two losing semi-finalists.

2

Scotland
Alix Popham will cycle 450 miles from Cardiff to Edinburgh in February to raise money for the Head for Change charity, which supports former players affected by neurodegenerative disease.

The Head to Edinburgh Cycle Challenge will see a group of riders, led by ex-Wales back-row Popham, cycle to Edinburgh in time for the Scotland v Wales (above) Six Nations match on 11 February.

Visit justgiving.com/fundraising/headforchangeedinburgh

3

Brazil
On the same day as the World Cup final at Eden Park, another historic women's rugby match took place at Estádio Nogueirão in Mogi das Cruzes, Brazil. The stadium hosted Brazil women's first-ever 15-a-side home Test, although Colombia (below) spoiled the party by winning 25-17.

The victory cements Colombia's status as the best women's 15-a-side team in South America.

4 New Zealand

Three ‘game innovations’ will be trialled across community rugby in New Zealand next year, including a reduced tackle height aimed at improving player safety. Tackles must be below the sternum and target the belly area for all community rugby grades.

The other two trials involve the scrum. The defensive scrum-half has to remain one metre from the scrum and can’t advance past the tunnel until the scrum has ended, while the maximum push for a scrum is 1.5 metres, unless it is within five metres of the try-line.

Email rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com to let us know your views on the trials.

5 St Lucia

St Lucia has become the 111th union to be a full member of World Rugby, while the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt and Syria have all become associate members. This takes the total membership of the governing body to 132.

6 Kenya

Kenya’s 23-3 win over Uganda in the Rugby Africa Women’s Cup saw them move up to 25th in the World Rugby Rankings. It also meant that they topped Pool B and go through to next year’s cup competition, which will act as a qualifier for the inaugural WXV tournament in 2023.

7 Hong Kong

Maurice Longbottom (left) was Player of the Match as Australia beat Fiji 20-17 to win the first leg of the Men’s World Sevens Series in Hong Kong. He put in a clever kick for Henry Hutchinson to score a crucial second-half try while Nathan Lawson touched down the winner in the final minute.

It was the first time Australia, the reigning series champions, have won the Hong Kong Sevens in 34 years. Captain Nick Malouf said: “I’m so proud of our group. We did well last year, but to be able to come out here and back it up means the world to us.”

LAST STOPS

8 Australia

Maddison and Teagan Levi (above) have re-signed with Australian Sevens until the end of 2024 in the hope of winning Olympic gold in Paris. “I’m really excited – there’s so much more to come,” Maddison said.

9 USA

Major League Rugby will have a new look for its sixth season next year. The LA Giltinis and Austin Gilgronis won’t be involved due to “uncertainties” around ownership but Chicago Hounds join the competition.

10 UAE

The Women’s World Sevens Series kicks off in Dubai on 2-3 December. Expect to see Jasmine Joyce (above) in action after the Wales wing, who played in the 15s World Cup, committed to the Great Britain programme.

THE SECRET REFEREE

Kolbe yellow was right call

Our former elite ref looks at a Boks tip tackle in Dublin – and questions doubtful officials

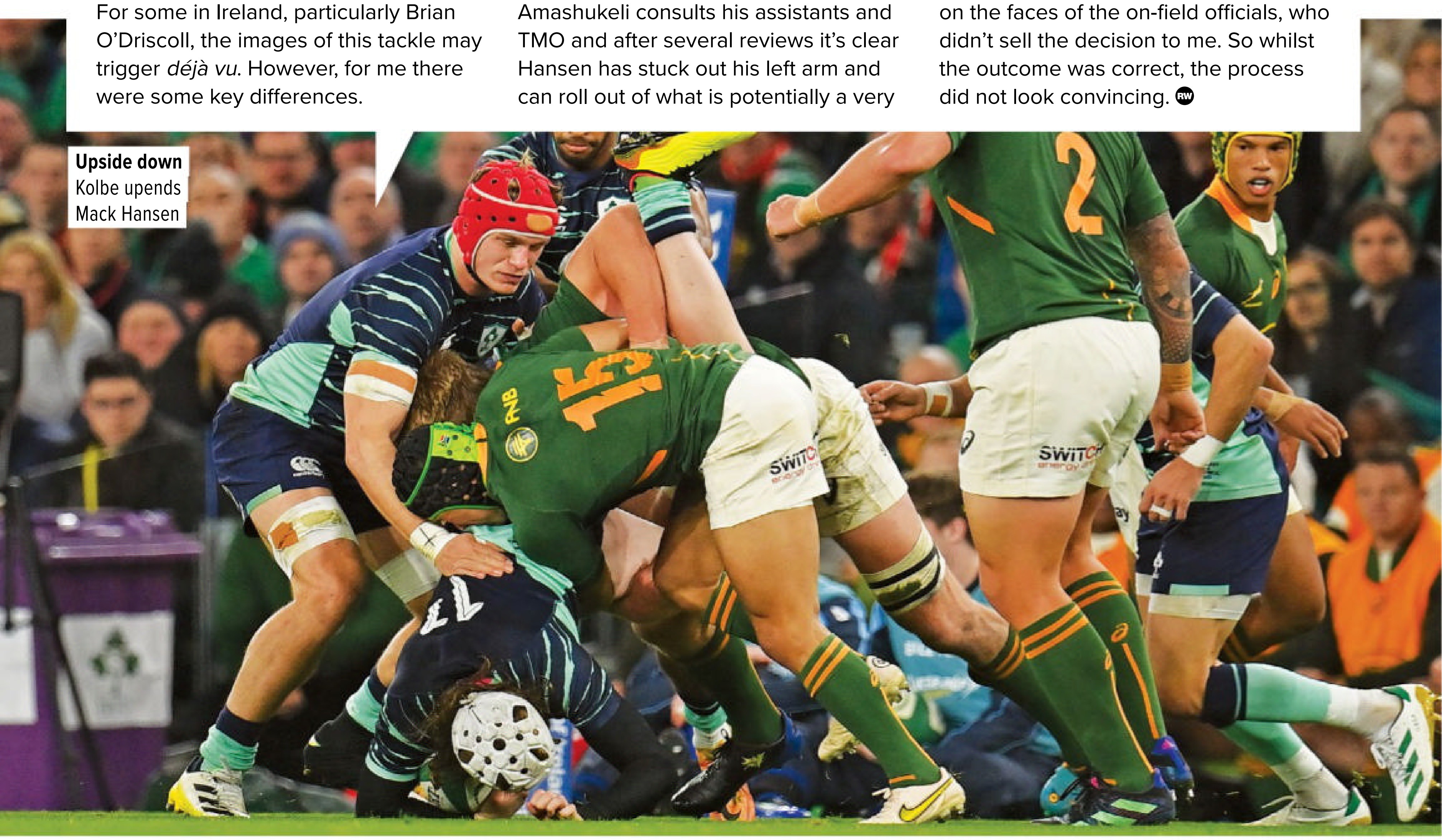
THE RECENT Ireland-South Africa game in the Autumn Nations Series provided some big talking points.

Not only was it the return of Rassie Erasmus after his long ban for criticising match officials, but top of the list for me was the 'tackle' by Cheslin Kolbe on Mack Hansen, the Irish winger. For some in Ireland, particularly Brian O'Driscoll, the images of this tackle may trigger *déjà vu*. However, for me there were some key differences.

In this incident there is one clear main tackler (Kolbe), who lifts Hansen's body beyond the horizontal. That sets the alarm bells ringing. Thankfully, he doesn't drive Hansen into the ground.

Kolbe is assisted by Pieter-Steph du Toit but PSDT merely holds Hansen around his hips and falls on top of him as part of Kolbe's action. Referee Nika Amashukeli consults his assistants and TMO and after several reviews it's clear Hansen has stuck out his left arm and can roll out of what is potentially a very serious injury. It results in a yellow. One thing is certain: had Hansen landed on his head or the back of his neck then it should have been a straight red card.

I'm convinced the officials came to the correct decision. What I'm less sure of is that they were confident in their call. After the TMO's intervention there was still a look of confusion and uncertainty on the faces of the on-field officials, who didn't sell the decision to me. So whilst the outcome was correct, the process did not look convincing. RW



Upside down Kolbe upends Mack Hansen

SCHOOLS ROUND UP

RUGBY SCHOOL will live-stream their home games in 2023, having partnered with website NextGenXV. Executive headmaster Peter Green said: "It's important that all those who cannot be here in person can still enjoy the incredible matches staged during this momentous year." Next year marks 200 years since rugby was officially born on the school's world-famous Close.

Pupils at **King Edwards VII School** in Gauteng helped alumni Bryan Habana break two world records last month – the most rugby passes by a team in one minute (96) and most passes by a team in three minutes (283).

There has been a recent change to the structure of Leinster's **Female Secondary Schools** programmes, after an increase in participation. With around 1,000 girls taking part so far, there will be Tier One (for established schools) and Tier Two (newer schools) competitions in the province.

JARGON BUSTER

Collapsed maul

When a defender(s) illegally stops a driving maul by pulling it down. If the attack was set to score, it will result in a penalty try and a yellow card.

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

DOMINIC McKAY

The chairman of European Professional Club Rugby on a landmark for the game

“The South African presence will strengthen our competitions”

New opponents Bordeaux-Bègles will face the Sharks

AS WE ready for a brand-new EPCR campaign, many astute observers believe that the next few years will be transformative for the professional game – perhaps as much as the seismic events of 1995. From the perspective of the Heineken Champions Cup and EPCR Challenge Cup, I’m confident change will be for the better.

This will be a landmark season with the integration of five leading South African clubs into EPCR’s tournaments. This innovative merging of the hemispheres will add a new layer of interest to competitions which have been forged in the main by the elite clubs from England, France, Ireland, Italy, Scotland and Wales.

As Stormers, Bulls, Sharks, Lions and Cheetahs prepare to go head-to-head for the first time on a competitive basis with the traditional powers from the Gallagher Premiership and the Top 14, the Heineken Champions Cup in particular is set to extend its reach and to attract even more new fans.

Naturally, such a tantalising proposition will present challenges for clubs, players and supporters. However, my belief as we work more and more closely with PRL, the LNR and the URC is that the South African presence will ultimately strengthen our competitions, and that the status of the Heineken Champions Cup will be established as a massively important showcase just below Test level.

For the Challenge Cup, which is understandably overshadowed for parts of the season by its more prestigious sibling, the stakes are also high. This season, as the Lions and Cheetahs join the fray, we have six previous winners with 11 EPCR titles between them in the fixture schedule. If its silverware has been undervalued, you only had to be in Marseille last May when Lyon so magnificently claimed a first trophy of any kind since 1933 to truly comprehend what Challenge Cup success meant.

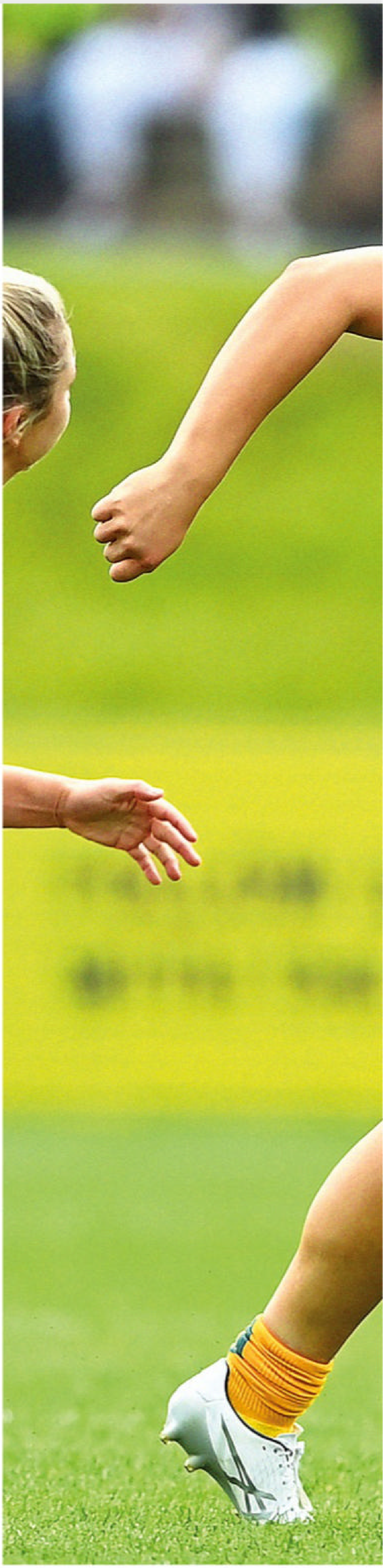
It would also be remiss of me when referencing our second tournament not to mention what has happened to Wasps and Worcester Warriors. The fallout both during and after the Covid 19 pandemic has had significant impact and while this is a devastating period for both clubs, their fate – hopefully temporary – is undoubtedly a reality check for everyone in the game.

Looking ahead, more eyes than ever will be on our competitions following the renewal of deals by BT Sport, beIN SPORTS and France Télévisions for the new broadcast cycle. In addition, we are joining forces with SuperSport in South Africa, ITV and RTÉ in the UK and Ireland, FloSports in the burgeoning USA market, and S4C in Wales to provide an effective combination of pay and free-to-air coverage.

Also, in what is likely to be a key development for the professional club game in both hemispheres, discussions around a Club World Cup with SANZAAR and other stakeholders are progressing. And while there are always complexities associated with any new order, I’m optimistic about this new initiative for players and fans alike.

What I can be sure of is that the Heineken Champions Cup, with its 13 elite winners, its iconic clubs, its global stars, its 22 million spectators to date, its broadcast reach to more than 150 countries worldwide and its brand-new South African influence, will deliver a mould-breaking season of thrilling contests, memorable moments and outstanding match-day experiences for all of our fans.

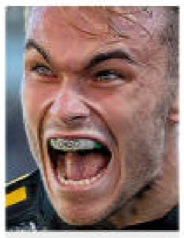
So, all EPCR roads lead to next May’s finals weekend at Dublin’s Aviva Stadium, for which nearly 60,000 tickets have already been sold. And I sense that 2022-23 will represent a launchpad for our tournaments to become even bigger and better as the professional club game continues to evolve.



RISING STARS

Interviews **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **Getty Images**

1 HARRY GLYNN



Age **21 (22 Aug 2001)** Born **Tulle, France** Position **Fly-half** Club **La Rochelle** Country **England**

So you grew up in France? I lived my first ten years in France, then we left to go to England. My parents are English but have a business in Corrèze. It's an activity centre and they bring UK groups over to do things like kayaking and rock climbing.

Where did you start playing rugby? In France, when I was four or five. I started in England at ten for Market Harborough, then for my schools – Leicester GS for GCSEs, Oakham for A levels.

What positions have you played? In France you don't have positions, you just play when you're young. Then when I came to Market Harborough the coaches asked if I was a forward or a back. I knew I wanted to be the guy outside running with the ball but I didn't know the name and I said 'forward', so my first game was as the B team hooker!

They then realised I had a bit of speed so I was wing for the A team, then moved into the centres and ten.

Childhood hero? Definitely my dad, Ged Glynn. He was a fly-half. I looked up to him and he was a big influence on me. For someone famous, Jonny Wilkinson. My dad coached him with England U21. He's definitely one of the greatest.

Your strengths? My running game. I like to attack, to have a go with the ball.

And work-ons? Tactical awareness, knowing when to run, to kick, to pass. That comes with time. My kicking out of hand has come on a lot since being at La Rochelle.

How did the move to La Rochelle come about? I joined in the summer of 2020, as we came out of lockdown. I started pre-season with Leicester – I'd come through the academy – but it became clear the A League and Championship wouldn't go ahead. It was my first year as a professional and I had George Ford and Zack Henry in front of me. I was lucky La Rochelle were looking for a fly-half and with my background it fitted.

What's it like to work with Ronan O'Gara? Really good. He gives a lot of advice. The backs coach, Sébastien Boboul, was the *espoirs* coach who got me to come. I've got a good relationship with both of them.

When does your contract end? This year. I love this club and really enjoy the place. I definitely would want to re-sign if they wanted me to.

RW VERDICT

Glynn marked his Top 14 debut with two tries v Perpignan. As for whether he'd want to play internationally for England or France – he qualifies for both – he prefers to focus on developing skills and playing more at club level for now.

2 BIENNE TERITA

Age 19 (16 May 2003) Born Sydney Position Wing Club Randwick Country Australia

When did you first get involved in rugby? My first form was sevens – that was my first contact sport. In terms of footy, I'd grown up playing Aus tag, which is league with tags. I got into sevens when I was 13 or 14 at my local club in Sydney, Randwick. I played a bit of 15s and have been in the sevens programme for the last two or three years.

Your parents were born in New Zealand. Did you ever think of representing NZ? I always wanted to represent Australia, it's where I was born and raised. Both my older sisters represented Australia. They played netball for a long time and started rugby at 17 or 18. Tayma played sevens at the Youth Olympics and Kenina played for the Wallaroos.

Your childhood hero? When I started watching sevens more, I watched Ellia Green pretty closely. I also like Sydney McLaughlin, the hurdler. I love watching what she does and her mindset. She's a very driven person; I like the way she takes challenges on.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career? Sharni Williams is a huge role model and has helped me so much. She has a lot of experience and so much knowledge of the game.

Are you a contracted sevens player? Yes. I was also doing a diploma of nursing but put that on hold because once we started travelling again (after Covid) it was too hard to juggle.

You were in the World Cup squads for sevens and 15s. What's the biggest difference? Probably the physicality. There are so many bodies on the field and it's so physical and there's not much space, so you have to create it. In sevens it's eyes up because there is so much space on the field.

What are your goals going forward? It's back to the sevens programme and qualifying for the Olympics. That is the big goal for me.

RW VERDICT

With four tries in her first two Tests – both against the Black Ferns – Terita was quick to make an impact on the world stage. With her pace and power, the teenager is destined for a big future in both sevens and 15s.

FACE-OFF

Should the Premiership be reduced to ten teams?

ROB BAXTER

Exeter Chiefs director of rugby

“IT’S 11 now. If you want to even up the numbers, it’s ten and everything becomes a little more manageable. The one thing we’ve got to do is get bodies through the gate and people who want to come to those nine home games – they’ve got to become big occasions.

“That’s something we have to work on, and it becomes easier when you know they’re nine big home games outside of international windows; everyone is available in a competition that starts to attract more support and coverage as we drive the quality of the games.

“There’s never going to be an answer that suits everybody. I don’t think anybody thought going to 13 teams was a good solution to anything. I’d have said 12 was a better number but there’s an argument that ten would work by taking Premiership fixtures out of International windows, but whatever happens there has to be some sort of promotion and relegation.

“It isn’t just when the Premiership games clash but rest periods, pre-season, limited time at the start and pressure at the end. Thirteen clubs creates those fallow weekends that extends the length of the season again.

“Then the big story in the game is the head injury situation. Thirteen is adding to the games of Premiership rugby players, not taking away at a time when that’s a big focus as well. Let’s declutter the calendar a little bit, so the season becomes more structured and there’s more common sense.”

ADAM HATHAWAY

Freelance rugby writer

“TEN-TEAM Premiership? Tell that to the clubs who dream of getting promoted to the top flight and fear that going down to ten is just a fast track to ring-fencing the league. And tell that to teams who would lose another home fixture when they need all the money they can get.

“All clubs have the right to think big. What if you are, say, Ealing, Jersey or Coventry? Worcester and Wasps will be coming back into the mix, all being well, and to make it a ten-team Premiership the league would have to lose another club. That leaves 15 clubs potentially in the Championship and that is never going to work.

“In May, Harvey Biljon signed a new seven-year contract that keeps him at Jersey Reds as DoR until 2029. He doesn’t strike me as someone who has done that to kick about in the second tier for the best part of a decade. Make no mistake, if the Premiership is cut to ten the ring-fencers will be out in force.

“I get Rob Baxter’s argument about the clash of Premiership fixtures with the international windows but wasn’t that what the play-offs were brought in to address? Whatever the rights and wrongs of the system, and I would bin them for a first-past-the-post title winner, they are supposed to be there to even it up for sides who may have a lot of players involved in Tests.

“And player welfare? What did teams do when they lost fixtures against Worcester and Wasps this season? Arranged more fixtures, that’s what.”

Fall in numbers
Two Premiership teams have dropped out this season

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Send your views to rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com

WHAT GOES ON TOUR...

[Goes in Rugby World]

WORLD CUPS are a treasure trove of stories – and you can stumble across them in the most unexpected of places, like a ferry from Devonport to Auckland CBD during the most recent tournament, *writes outgoing RW editor Sarah Mockford.*

Enjoying the sunshine on the top deck, we got into conversation with an American woman. Forgive the scarcity of details – it was a brief chat as the ferry docked – but the essence of the story is here.

She had taken up rugby while at university in Maryland in the late 1970s, playing at lock, and after graduating embarked on a trip to Europe. While in London, she found herself in the same hotel as a Scottish school team and, eager to converse with fellow lovers of the game, she tracked down the coach to tell him that she played.

"Girls don't play rugby," came the retort.

After a few back-and-forths along the same lines, he asked her to demonstrate her rugby background by tackling him. She did that with aplomb – it was the first thing her coaches had taught her in the US; she wrapped his legs and followed through with a shoulder drive to fell him.

Feeling it was a fluke, he asked her to do it again, but the same result was achieved: the coach ended up flat on his back.

After dusting himself down, he pulled two tickets out of his pocket for the game his team were playing at Twickenham. "These are my final two tickets," he said. "Bring whichever friend you want."

He had clearly been won over and she was able to experience a game at Twickenham. RW

WE WON'T TELL, PROMISE...

We love hearing your stories and want to celebrate the characters of our great game in What Goes On Tour... If you have an amusing tale to tell, drop us a line. Mark your email 'Tour Tale' and send it to rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com

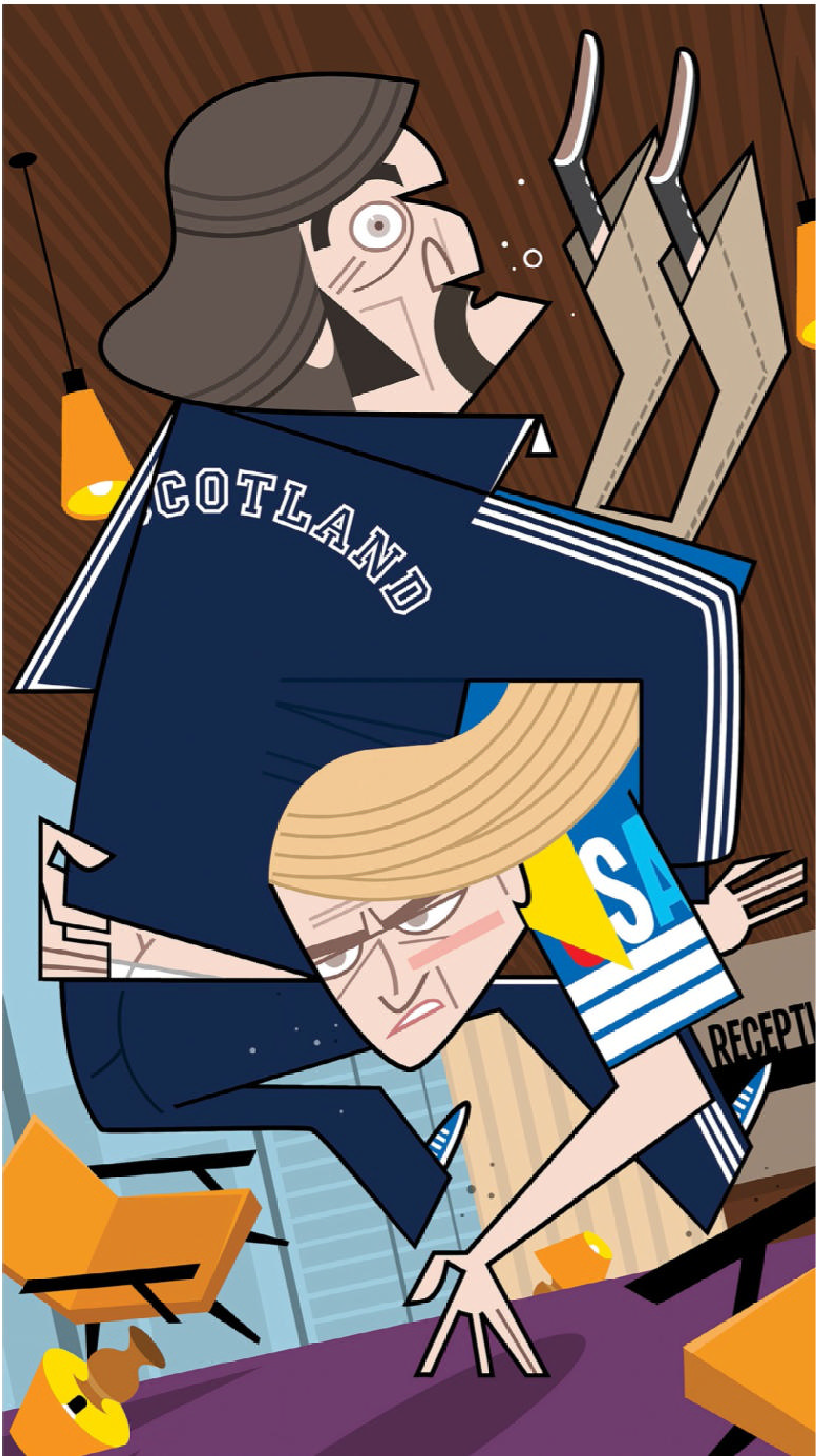


ILLUSTRATION David Lyttleton

Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Getty Images**

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO…

REIMAGINE A FAMOUS RUGBY BRAND

Durban's Sharks are headed in a totally new direction under their ownership

HOW QUICKLY can you flip a culture? Because in the time since MVM Holding bought the Sharks franchise to now, Durban's top team look very different, inside and outside the white lines of the pitch.

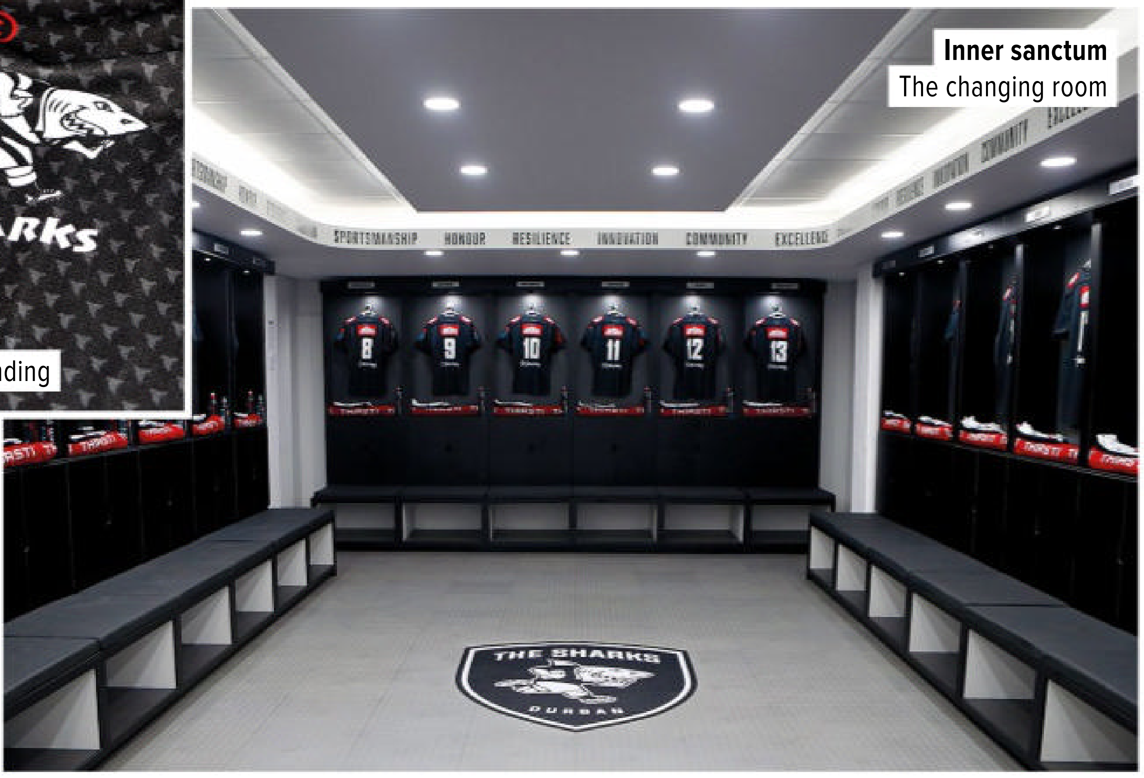
A rebrand is nothing new there – this is the side who were known colloquially as 'The Banana Boys' for many years, before Natal plumped for the Sharks moniker, officially. But many will tell you that they do things differently in the region anyway. In October last year, former assistant Grant Bashford explained to *Rugby World* that through the years they embraced a mix of influences from around South Africa, as well as a foreign touch. Tony Brown, Juan Martín Hernández, Freddie Michalak, Andy Goode and Gregor Townsend have all been playmakers there, with the latter telling us: "The reason (my move) came around is the Springboks had a poor World Cup in 2003, and part of the review was 'We need more foreign influence in our country'. England had won a World Cup with a lot of foreign coaches and players in their championship. So Rudi Straeuli managed to get that through."

Bashford went a little further, telling us: "Tony Brown in his own right was a genius. And so was Michalak. Coaching him, you would just say to the other guys in the back-line, 'Listen, expect the

Outside the ground
Kings Park now has a gambling naming sponsor

HOLLYWOODbets KINGS PARK
HOLLYWOODbets KINGS PARK
THE SHARKS
I ♥ SHARKS

Fin-tastic
Sharks branding



Inner sanctum
The changing room

ball because I don't know what's going to happen!'"

Being unpredictable is fun, and so is housing superstars. But in the age of new ownership – who had originally bid for the financially beleaguered Stormers, before eventually landing in Durban – they have gone for the cream of South African talent. Stars like Siya Kolisi, Bongi Mbonambi and Eben Etzebeth have joined, while former SA sevens mastermind Neil Powell has come on this season as director of rugby; he's overseeing a brand-new structure that has coaches Sean Everitt and Warren Whiteley looking after the URC and Champions Cup side, and the highly-rated Joey Mongalo driving the Currie Cup outfit, with names like JP Pietersen and Lwazi Mvovo under him.

"It's all about building that brand and building a team too," Powell said when he took over. "We all know we can only be a successful team and build the brand if the team is successful on the field.

"From my personal view, the short and long term is looking after the academy to see how we can change things there. So we can get juniors to come through at U20 and make it all the way to the Currie Cup and URC, so we don't have to buy players from outside our system."

Which sounds like a sensible approach. However, will the largely US-based consortium who own the side (with support from Jay-Z's Roc Nation) be willing to wait patiently for a return on investment? In May, board member and former player Tendai 'Beast' Mtawarira said: "They want to turn the Sharks into a championship-winning combination and I think the recruitment has shown that."

So on a recent trip to South Africa, we spoke to Shaun Bryans, who comes from the world of corporate finance and private equity investing, and serves as a voice for the Sharks consortium in the country. He chairs the finance committee too. On the project, he says: "It's not like owning a business that's highly profitable and you rock up once a year to collect dividends!

"We have three or four strategic things that we need to focus on with the business (led by group CEO Eduard Coetzee). Because it's a difficult, challenging environment, you do get easily distracted with the daily operations which have to be dealt with, but there are a few strategic initiatives.

"Obviously success is one thing. We want to be an on- and off-field success."

Here Bryans tells an anecdote of meeting with Marco Masotti, the true figurehead of the consortium and the biggest investor, and fabled coach Brendan Venter. And from the off Venter challenged what 'success' meant. Over the course of a chat, they agreed that sustained performance was the key.

"Then there's everything that we want to do off-field around leadership, which is around community development, involvement, social responsibility. In this country transformation is very important. So the Sharks are the most transformed rugby team in the country and we're very proud of that. And that's something that we've put a lot of effort and energy into."

But going beyond that into brand, Bryans adds: "I suppose you can say we bring in a slightly American way of thinking – and that's with some intentionality. We have a lot of US people in our consortium. People like Marco have exposure to professional sports in the US, and see ownership of professional sports franchises in the US through clients and what have you.

"They see that model and then see the model here and it's quite different. I think, in the same way that I would imagine it is in, say, England, where the professionalisation of rugby union hasn't really completed its transition."

They want better partnerships and amazingly see Premiership clubs having a say on the league and wonder if they could have a bit more involvement with the URC or South African union, to bring their US knowledge to bear.

But behind it all, Bryans tells us: "What we're trying to create with the Sharks is a global sports and entertainment brand, not just a rugby franchise. We want the exposure in Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Wales and Ireland and England and France as well with the Heineken Cup.

"It's chalk and cheese (with what was before). It's very exciting in terms of the exposure and commercial value of that. The question, which is a difficult one, is: how do we tap into that effectively?" RW

DID YOU KNOW?

With Aphelele Fassi, Siya Kolisi and Tendai 'Beast' Mtawarira all with Roc Nation, the entertainment agency has ties with three stars linked with the Sharks. When joining the side, Boks captain Kolisi said: "I bought into the vision of the Sharks immediately."

Shark tank
Back-row forward Sikhumbuzo Notshe

> "We bring in a slightly American way of thinking – and that is with some intentionality"

THE RUGBY RANT

Bonkers ticket prices mean Test rugby is limited to the few, argues Marcello Cossali-Francis

Star attraction
New Zealand take on the Boks at Twickenham next year

PICS Getty Images

BRILLIANT NEWS, I thought. Two of the best sides in the world, in New Zealand and world champions South Africa, will go head-to-head at Twickenham just weeks before the Rugby World Cup kicks off next year.

What an opportunity for rugby supporters on these shores to watch the best on the planet in a one-off clash, a match that people might otherwise never get to witness. It's a once-in-a-lifetime type of occasion.

So you can maybe forgive my expletives when I checked ticket prices for such a fixture. £80 a pop?! Surely not!

The prices for the game are astronomical. It's a glorified 'friendly', why on earth are the prices so outrageous? How do the RFU expect to 'grow the game' when they're making it almost impossible for your average-Joe rugby fanatic on average-Joe wages to go and watch.

> **"It's a glorified 'friendly'. Why on earth are the prices so outrageous?"**

Rugby is quickly becoming an elitist sport that is only affordable to those with deep pockets. People that actually love rugby and want to experience top-flight international games are being priced out. But organisations like the RFU know they can exploit people's love for the game. They know people will beg, borrow and steal to stump up the cash to get a ticket; it's wrong.

But this is not just an RFU issue, this is widespread. Last season I debated going to the Principality Stadium to watch a Wales Six Nations game but only tickets for the game against Italy were less than £100.

Some of the cheaper tickets to watch Scotland v New Zealand at Murrayfield in mid-November were around £65 and if I do not want a 'restricted view' seat at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin, the cheapest for their clash against Fiji was €65. Category Four tickets for their match with South Africa were €110; just eye-watering prices.

It is already costing people hundreds of pounds just to get to stadiums, have a drink and some food, before factoring in the ticket. There have been dips in atmospheres at some of these games, such as England v Argentina and Wales v New Zealand, and it's because many of those who really do want to be there to support their country simply cannot afford it.

The price of living is rocketing and times are really tough for a lot of people. Sport, rugby being one of them, is an out, a release, for so many people.

So the idea that governing bodies are willing to charge these prices for what are by definition 'friendlies' is borderline criminal and is miles away from the narrative that 'rugby is for everyone'.

HAVE YOUR SAY

What gets your goat? Let us know on Facebook or tweet @Rugbyworldmag

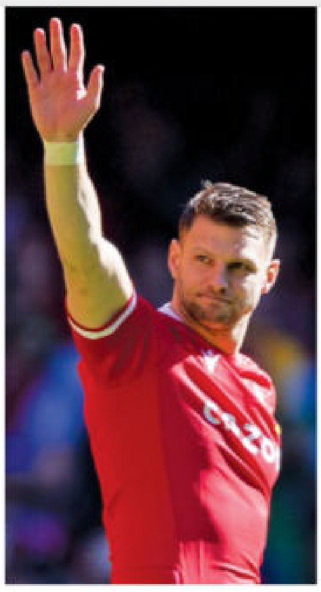
SHORT PASS

HEADING OFF
DoR Andy Friend will leave Connacht at the end of the season.

IN DEMAND
Over 20,000 tickets for the England-France Women's Six Nations match at Twickenham have already been sold – get yours at eticketing.co.uk/rfu

ITALIAN JOB
Jacob Umaga has joined Benetton after Wasps' administration.

FRENCH SOJOURN
Wales and Lions No 10 Dan Biggar (right) has left Northampton Saints to join Toulon on a multi-year deal.



SAD LOSS
Former Ireland centre Paul McNaughton, who also served as national team manager and EPCR chairman, has sadly died aged 69.

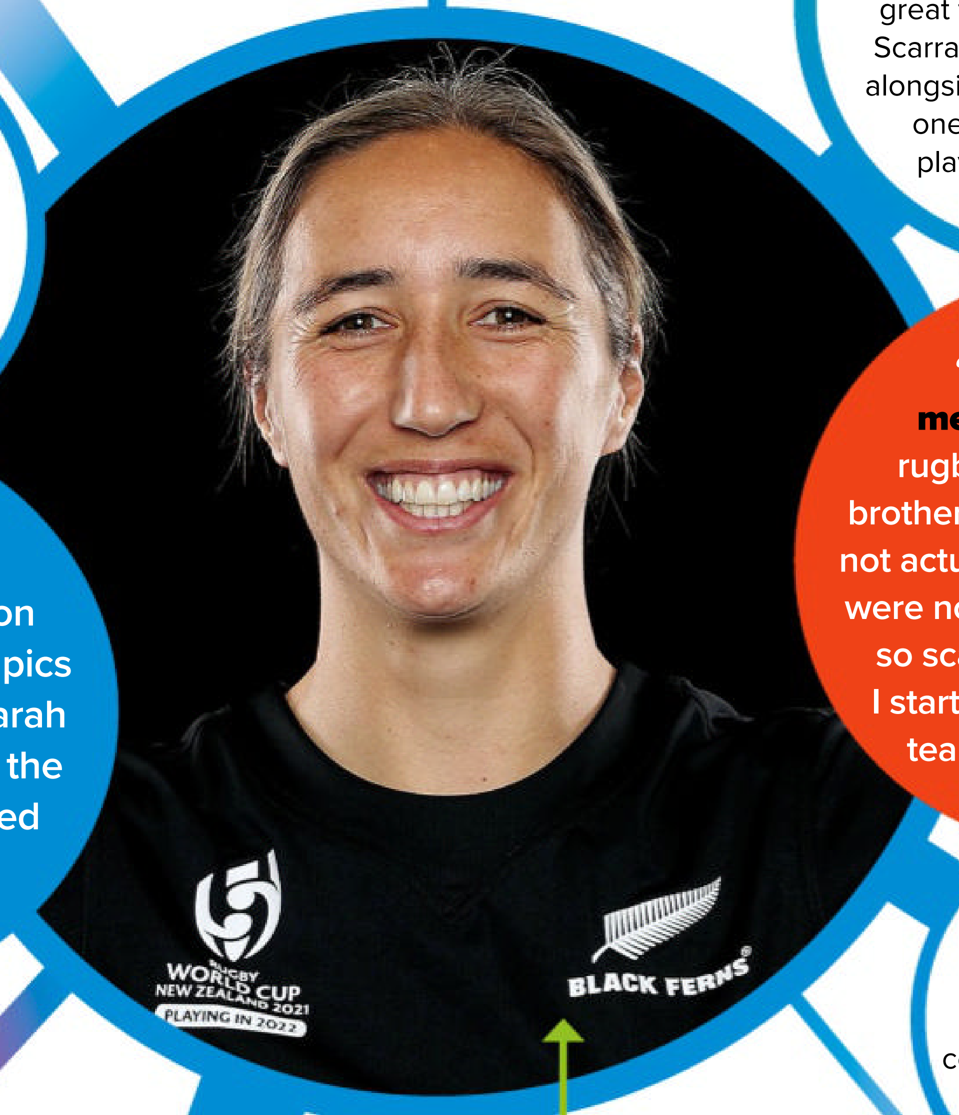
TOP JOBS
Belinda Moore and Genevieve Shore have been appointed chief executive and chair of Women's Premier 15 Limited, which will run England's top women's league from 2023-24.

HIGH JUMP
Richard Whiffin is leaving his role as Wales Women attack coach to join the Highlanders back-room team.

INSIDE THE MIND OF... SARAH HIRINI

Interview **Sarah Mockford** // Picture **Getty Images**

The Black Ferns star talks the Olympics, Oprah and big occasions


RUGBY WORLD CUP NEW ZEALAND 2021
PLAYING IN 2022
BLACK FERNS

"The best place I've visited? Dubai is completely different to what I'm used to. I also love **Japan** – that's a place I want to live one day."

"I've been very lucky and played in some of the biggest games ever, and I really enjoy that. I probably love the **finals** games more than pool play. That's why I want to train really hard so I'm in a position to enjoy those games. And the fans at the World Cup backing us were incredible."

"The best thing about rugby is my **friendships**. It's amazing – you meet incredible people. I've got a great friendship with Emily Scarratt and I'd love to play alongside her one day. She's one of the best rugby players in the world."

"The key to **captaincy** for me is leading by example through my actions, being the best player I can be for my team. It's knowing who all the players are, the endless talent everyone has and brings."

"My first rugby **memory** is going to rugby sign-up with my brother when I was nine and not actually signing up. There were no other girls and I was so scared. I was 13 when I started playing in a girls' team at high school."

"Cyclist **Sarah Ulmer** was my childhood hero. She won a gold medal at the Olympics and I always wanted a Sarah Ulmer bike. She's one of the big reasons why I wanted to be an Olympic athlete."

"The best **advice** I've been given is from the headmaster of my house at school. He constantly said, 'Do it now' and that was relevant for me playing sport."

"I like anything Japanese and also a home-cooked **roast**. And the roast has to be from my family farm, not from a shop. My mum did amazing lamb chops. I struggle to eat lamb anywhere else than the farm."

"I'd like to meet **Oprah**, although I'd probably be so starstruck. I'd want to ask how she did what she's done. And talk about food because I love food too."

"Obviously **switching** between sevens and 15s is hard, but I love it and it's probably why I keep trying to do it. It's a good challenge to be comfortable in every environment and it's nice coming to 15s and just being a player (rather than captain)."

"I haven't had too many jobs in my time but the hardest one I've ever done is **sheep shearing**. I used to do that in the summer and I'm grateful for it – it did help me buy a house – but it was hard. I grew up on a farm and we did all the shearing."

Morné Steyn

The veteran Bulls fly-half is managing his late-career transition brilliantly

Words **Jon Cardinelli** // Pictures **Getty Images**

BULLS ASSISTANT Chris Rossouw remembers going head-to-head against a 25-year-old Morné Steyn in the 2009 Currie Cup. Back then, Steyn was a national hero and – in Rossouw's opinion – already a class apart from most tens on the scene.

As a fly-half, Rossouw was no slouch. By 2009 he'd joined the Cheetahs and his career was winding down. Steyn's was just taking off. Thanks to the latter's nerveless kicking from hand and off the tee, the Springboks beat the British & Irish Lions 2-1 in the series staged in South Africa and downed the All Blacks three times en route to a Tri-Nations title. He also guided the Bulls to victory in Super Rugby and the Currie Cup.

"What struck me back then was how well he did the basics, and how well he understood the kicking game," Rossouw says with no small amount of admiration.

More than a decade later, Steyn – now 38 – still set the standard. Some felt he'd play out his club career with Stade Français, but in 2020 he answered Jake White's call to rejoin the Bulls as a mentor-player.

The Bulls have since won three domestic competitions and made the URC final. Last season's semi-final victory against Leinster was huge.

As Rossouw confirms, Steyn's impact has been profound, even though he's rarely started ahead of Johan Goosen and Chris Smith, the frontline fly-halves. "We first had a chance to work together in 2020, after he joined the Bulls for a second stint," Rossouw says. "My brother (former Boks wing Pieter), who was an assistant with the Bulls between 2008 and 2015, gave me some insight into his skill-set, character and basically his journey to the top.

Fist of fury
A happy Steyn

"When he got back from France, it was clear that he'd added even more to his game. His understanding of the kicking game was incredible back in 2009. By 2020, he had taken that understanding to a much higher level. His ability to identify the space, and then his ability to hit that space with the right sort of kick... He's just in a different class.

"A lot of teams bring in older players to boost the level of performance and assist with the development of the youngsters. It doesn't always work out. If they struggle to perform, they can become negative and that can impact their role as a mentor. With Morné, however, he has been completely positive about his role as a mentor and has never stopped working to maintain his level of performance as a player."

FACT FILE

Age 38 (11 Jul 1984)
Born Cape Town
Height 6ft
Weight 14st 4lb
Position Fly-half
Franchise Bulls
Insta @mornesteyn

In 2021, at the age of 37, Steyn slotted a penalty to clinch a series victory for South Africa over the Lions. He made some key contributions for the Bulls over the course of the inaugural URC and, more recently, nailed a long-range penalty to beat a spirited Edinburgh side at Loftus Versfeld. His career may be winding down, but his appetite for the big kick is as healthy as ever.

"Morné is like a good red wine as he just gets better with age," says Rossouw. "I often say that a playmaker needs some time to settle into a game when they come off the bench. With Morné, however, you know he's always ready.

"What's really important to note is that even at this age he still wants the chance to kick under pressure. It's good for the team in terms of the scoreboard, and it also sends a message to the younger players about how they should embrace those sorts of challenges."

Steyn may retire at the end of the season. His passion for the game remains undiminished and he could be recruited as a kicking coach somewhere. He plans to design a kicking programme to boost performance at school level too.

Despite the memes, Steyn won't be at the Bulls forever or facing the Lions in 2033. But there's a chance one of his protégés will be at the tee. For SA fans, that is an encouraging thought.

“Morné is like a good red wine as he just gets better with age”

WHO'LL RISE TO CHALLENGE?

We run the rule over the contenders in Europe's second-tier competition

Front foot
Leigh Halfpenny v Bayonne in 2019

PICS Getty Images

THE CHAMPIONS CUP tends to get all the attention when the European competitions get underway, but there is plenty to like about its little brother too. After all, there are three former European champions involved in this season's Challenge Cup – Bath, Brive and Toulon – as well as four teams who have lifted this trophy previously – Bath (again!), Bristol, Cardiff and Stade Français.

There are some new faces this term too, with the addition of the Cheetahs and the Lions from South Africa. Yes, South Africa isn't in Europe but the country's involvement in the URC means they are also now part of these two competitions (let's think of it like Australia being in Eurovision!).

Bright sparks
Perpignan fans

Of course, the suspension of Wasps and Worcester from the Premiership meant there needed to be a fixture reshuffle. Rather than bring in teams from other nations, like Georgia or Spain, organisers opted to pit the two clubs' original opponents against each other. So Lions will face Dragons and Bayonne will take on Benetton.

So that's the logistics covered – but who do we think has a shot at lifting the trophy? Stade Français kick off against Benetton on Friday 9 December and are riding high in the Top 14, sitting fourth in mid-November. If they commit to their European campaign – that may depend on what team they send to Johannesburg to face the Lions in round two – they could progress deep into the tournament.

They have the added motivation of wanting to give long-term coach Gonzalo Quesada a silverware send-off after Stade's owner Hans-Peter Wild announced that the coach would be replaced by Laurent Labit and Karim Ghezal after next year's World Cup.

Toulon, who play Zebre and Bath in the pool stages, could be other contenders from across the Channel. They have a new man at No 10 in Dan Biggar, who is sure to add plenty of drive and direction to the squad.

Bristol start their campaign away at Top 14 strugglers Perpignan, where there should be a fantastic atmosphere under the Friday night lights at Stade Aimé Giral. The Bears have the talent to lift the trophy they won in 2020 again – if they can find consistency.

Scarlets have endured a miserable start to the season but have enjoyed famous days in Europe over the years. Could the Challenge Cup be a chance to reset? They kick things off against Bayonne on 11 December before facing the Cheetahs in, er, Parma, which eases the travel demands on Scarlets.

It may be the second-tier event but lifting a trophy is not to be sniffed at.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

STEVE BOYLE

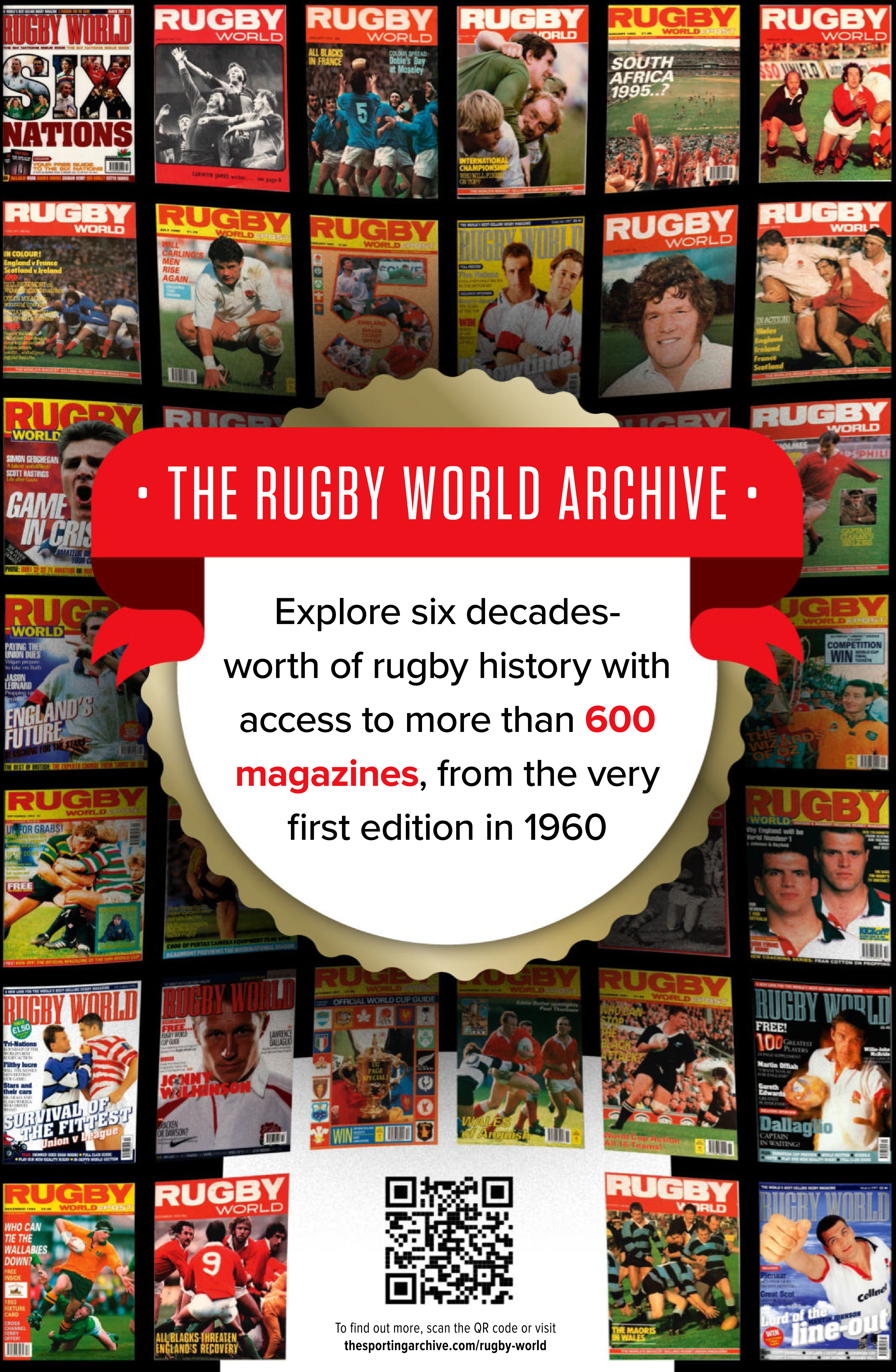
Age 69 **Position** Lock **Teams** Gloucester, Moseley, England & Lions

"I HAD been at the Pilgrim Hotel in Herefordshire from 2002 until March, when I sold it and moved over to France. My wife, Jacqueline, and I bought a small farm and B&B half an hour south of Bergerac. We are hoping to get the B&B open next year.

"I needed to retire. Before the hotel I had been in banking and finance until I was 50. Firstly, with the Lloyds Bank Group, then in their finance company, Lloyds and Scottish.

"When I finished playing, in 1985, my career took off as I wasn't leaving early for training twice a week. Lloyds did pay my wages on the 1983 Lions tour, which was handy because we got £4 a day and phoned home from journalists' rooms.

"I have two Birmingham Hips, like Andy Murray, when they resurface the joints and am still in touch with Gloucester lads like Mike Teague and Steve Mills. It is good to see the current side going well under George Skivington."



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charlie starmer-smith
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The festive season is upon us and we have a few present ideas for the rugby fans in your life

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12
TUDOR
GENEVE
9
3
RANGER
6

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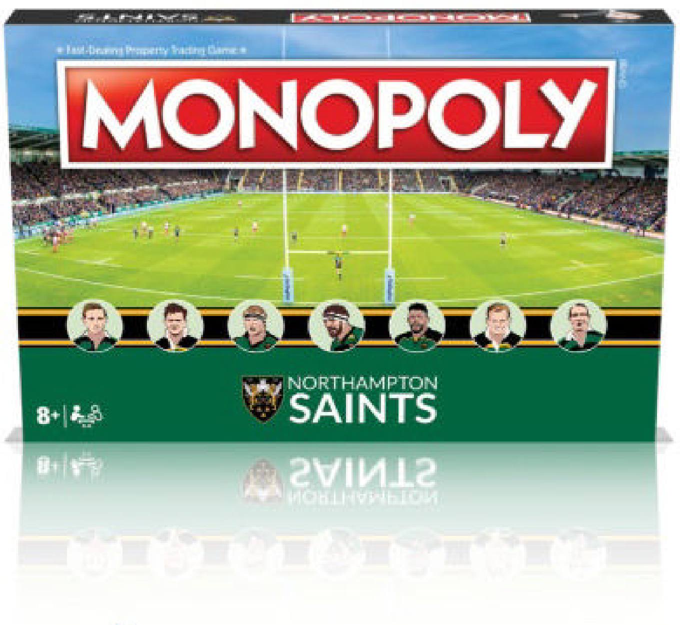
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8+

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▼ RUGBY HISTORY BOOK From £20

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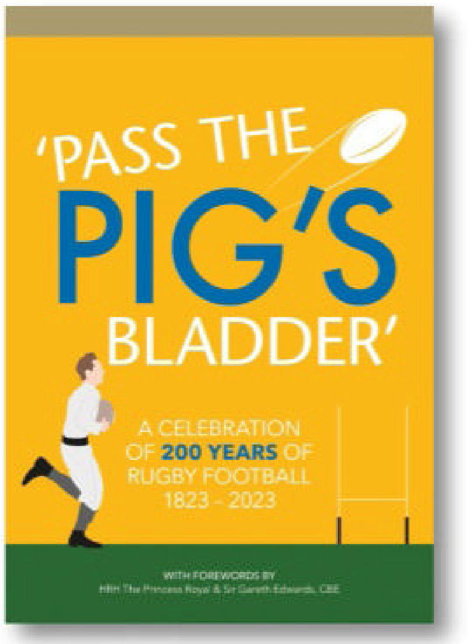
This book (£35 for hardback), by Rugby School and Mercer Books, marks 200 years of rugby. See rugbyworld.com for more books that will appeal to your rugby-loving friends and family.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GIFT GUIDE

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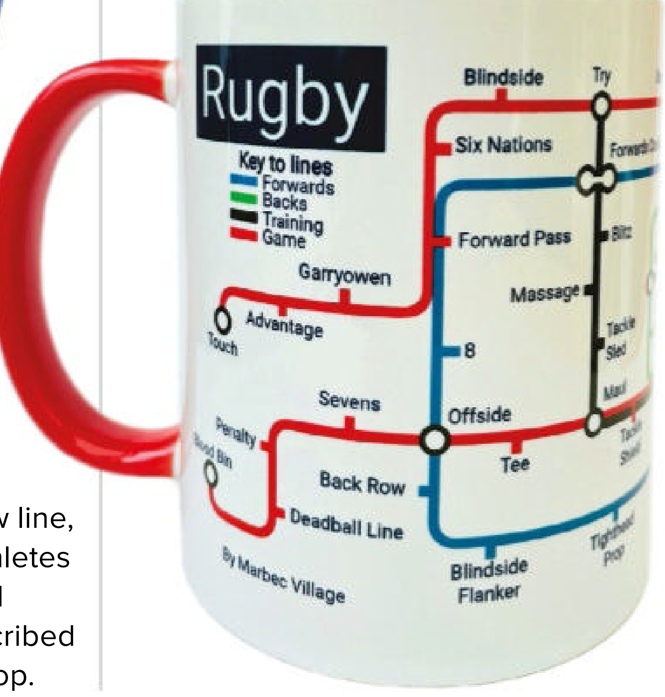
An underground map combined with rugby phrases – what could be more entertaining when enjoying a morning cuppa?! The four 'lines' are forwards, backs, games and training, and it's also available with a blue handle.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"Let's use this to slingshot women's rugby into another dimension"

Words **Sarah Mockford** // Main Picture **Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images**

The World Cup in New Zealand was a game-changer but the sport must build on that momentum. We reflect on what the Black Ferns' triumph means for rugby and look at what comes next

SO OFTEN the words 'All Blacks' have reverberated around Eden Park, yet this time it was 'Black Ferns' being chanted. Until this year's World Cup, no one had ever paid to watch women's rugby in New Zealand. Now 42,579 fans had packed out the famous stadium in Auckland to witness them beating England in the final. This truly was a landmark occasion.

Wayne Smith later described it as "the most phenomenal rugby moment of my life, hearing the ground chanting the names of these girls". He's had a fair few decent moments, too, having helped the All Blacks to World Cup glory in 2011 and 2015. His most recent accomplishment, of guiding the women's team to a sixth world title, which seemed almost unthinkable 12 months previously, could have the most lasting impact, though.

Their World Cup triumph has sparked a passion in New Zealand for the Black Ferns that is long overdue. In World Cup terms, the nation's women have been far more successful than the men, winning all but two of the tournaments entered, yet for decades they were underfunded, under-resourced and, quite frankly, underappreciated. Now they are being rightly lauded and celebrated – and paid.

So how did they turn things around just a year on from those record defeats in England and France? Why are the Red Roses still crucial to the strides being made in the women's game? And how does the sport capitalise on this watershed moment? We take a look...

NEW ZEALAND 2021
BLACK FE
RUGBY WORLD CUP NEW ZEALAND PLAYING IN 2022

A triumph on home soil
Ruahei Demant and Kennedy Simon lift the World Cup

BLACK FERNS MAGIC

Before reflecting on that incredible final (perhaps the greatest ever?) when the Black Ferns beat the Red Roses 34-31, it's worth rewinding 12 months to their humbling tour of Europe. For all the praise heaped on the likes of Smith, Graham Henry and Dan Carter for their work with the team, they wouldn't have even been involved had one woman not spoken out.

7

Tries scored by New Zealand's **Portia Woodman** – the most by anyone at this year's World Cup

Break time Ayesha Leti-I'iga makes ground for the Black Ferns

After record defeats to England and France in late 2021, hooker Te Kura Ngata-Aerengamate said she suffered a "mental breakdown" on the tour following alleged critical comments from the coaching team. That sparked a cultural review of the Black Ferns set-up and the report was damning, highlighting systemic failures in supporting the women's high-performance programme and leading to the resignation of Glenn Moore as head coach.

That is when Smith stepped in and recruited a few of his old coaching buddies, while legendary fly-half Carter offered to pass on some of his kicking expertise. A few other former All Blacks have chipped in with sessions or offered mentorship to some of the Black Ferns, but fundamentally it was Smith's tactical overhaul and New Zealand Rugby's decision to hand out the first full-time contracts to 15-a-side women's players that led to a remarkable turnaround in fortunes from those 2021 Tests.

'The Professor', as he is known, recognised that the Black Ferns couldn't compete with the European powerhouses' structured set-piece game, so instead he focused more on attack and broken-field play, areas where he thought his players' skill-sets could be best utilised. Scrum-half Kendra Cocksedge described the approach as "causing chaos".

"I was adamant that I wanted to create a game that was true to our DNA," says Smith. "Not to reinvent anything but just teaching the girls how to play on top of teams. Hopefully it's a blueprint for the future because I think it has excited people, and it has excited the girls."

For all the talk of unstructured play, there has been plenty of work on the details too. After all, Smith is known for his intricate analysis and the final is a perfect illustration. After their half-time briefing from the coach, the Black Ferns focused their attack down the left, where Lydia Thompson would have been had she not been red-carded in the 18th minute for a dangerous tackle on Portia Woodman. It wasn't just the clever runs of Stacey Fluhler exploiting that space either, they also used kicks to put their opponents under pressure.

Triple top Wayne Smith has won three World Cups

42k

Fans at Eden Park for the final – the sellout crowd is a women's rugby record

As for the final lineout, where England were looking to set their famed driving maul to snatch a win after the hooter had sounded, analysis was again key. Smith sent the message down to send a player up rather than simply defend the maul and Joanah Ngan-Woo got the World Cup-winning steal. "We'd been doing that analysis all week and knew that Abbie Ward was their main jumper," the second-row said afterwards. "I'd seen it before and knew what was coming."

Above all else, though, was the pure joy and excitement within the squad.

You could see it as the players walked out at Eden Park for their three matches there, the awe on their faces as they took in the vast numbers of spectators. It was evident whenever you spent time in the team hotel, too: the smiles and the laughter, the singing and the joking.

At first it was something of a culture shock for Smith, but he quickly grasped the importance of that type of environment. He says: “The All Blacks, the men, need to play well to be able to be happy and enjoy life. The Black Ferns, the women, need to be happy and enjoying life to be able to play well.”

That they certainly did in the World Cup.

80

Tackles made by **Alex Callender** (Wales) and **Madoussou Fall** (France) to top the stats charts

3

World Cup final hat-tricks – **Amy Cokayne** (Eng, 2022), **Toka Natua** (NZ, 2017) & **Vanessa Cootes** (NZ, 1998)

STANDARD BEARERS

Ultimately this World Cup was a failure for England. They arrived in New Zealand as overwhelming favourites having not lost since 2019, spent three years as professionals and been given every resource they could need. Yet they came up short in the final, their record 30-Test winning run ended at the cruellest possible time.

Yes, the fact they were so competitive in the final when down to 14 players for more than an hour was quite incredible, a testament to their grit and determination. Indeed, they even had a chance to win it at the death, only for their greatest strength to become too predictable. Would a little deception at that final lineout have given them more chance of outfoxing the hosts? Would a five-three split on the bench have given them more options to rejig their team after the sending-off?

Ifs, buts, maybes… Nothing will change the result and England are still yet to beat the Black Ferns in a World Cup. So much was focused on becoming world champions for a third time, but they fell at the final hurdle and must wait three years for another shot, on home soil.

> “The All Blacks need to play well to be happy. The Black Ferns need to be happy to play well”

While their goal wasn’t achieved, it is worth considering the wider perspective and what England have done for the game as a whole. Before becoming England’s most-capped player during the tournament, Sarah Hunter reflected on how much had changed since her early days. She recalled how the team weren’t permitted to use the RFU logo on their shirts when she made her Test debut. “We had what we used to joke was a tulip, or a rosebud that hadn’t quite blossomed yet,” she said.

Well, the Red Roses have bloomed now, with the RFU’s commitment to the women’s programme and the Allianz Premier 15s, and most importantly their financial investment, forcing other nations to step up too. The English game has been the standard bearer. As Black Ferns star Ruby Tui puts it: “I’m proud of what England have done for women’s rugby. They’ve led the way.”

THEY'RE NOT GIRLS
THEY'RE LEGENDS
BOOM!
EDEN

Sign of the times Ruby Tui, the breakout star of the World Cup, engages with supporters at Eden Park

91

Offloads made by the **Black Ferns** during the World Cup, including 18 by captain Ruahei Demant

Even amidst the acute disappointment of losing the final, Ward was able to see the bigger picture, saying: “It’s amazing to see where women’s rugby has gone. Yes, this is tough to take, but that’s the reality of sport. We can be proud of

➡

➡ our effort and legacy, how we've helped grow the sport. To see what it's done for rugby in New Zealand is amazing and hopefully we can take that worldwide. Let's use this to slingshot women's rugby into another dimension."

The money the RFU has put into the Red Roses has meant more countries are now offering some form of contracts. And despite failing to lift the trophy, RFU chief executive Bill Sweeney has promised that the governing body will not be taking its "foot off the gas".

"I don't think we'll reduce investment because the result hasn't gone our way," he says. "It's got too many other spin-offs. If you see a successful community club, it tends to have a strong women's side. It's good for the overall health of the game.

"All the other unions have seen the effect that a successful women's game can have. So I think you'll see other unions starting to invest. We all want that. You want meaningful games because that will help on the broadcast and commercial side and enable us to reinvest money back into the game."

101

Runs made by Canada captain **Sophie de Goede** – 25% more than anyone else at the World Cup

The challenge now is for more countries to follow England's lead. Ireland, Scotland and Wales have introduced contracts for players. The Black Ferns are contracted until March, so the hope is that NZ Rugby will continue on that road too.

Yet countries like Canada and the USA, Fiji and Japan also need better investment. And more games, whether at domestic or international level. The introduction of WXV, the new global women's tournament, next year should

1998
2002
2006
2010
2017
NEW ZEALAND 2021
BLACK FERNS

increase the number of Tests that nations play and there are also plans to incentivise countries to match funding from World Rugby in the women's game.

"What you want is these women and girls playing rugby week in, week out," says Sally Horrox, World Rugby director of women's rugby. "But it's the unions' responsibility to do that, our job to support them. If we can help provide more cross-border competition, in the way that Fijiana entered Super W, we will. We have to be quite creative to achieve what we want to achieve if we are going to close the gap. It's a priority."

Sealed with a kiss Theresa Fitzpatrick and Stacey Fluhler with the World Cup

44

Points scored by England's **Emily Scarratt**, making her the tournament's top point-scorer

The World Cup expands to 16 teams in 2025 and the goal has to be for more competitive fixtures across the board. Sport needs uncertainty of outcome to appeal and at the moment there are too many results that are predictable.

STAR QUALITY

Women's rugby has found other ways to attract new audiences and sell the sport, though. One of those is through the sheer power of its personalities.

Last month in *Rugby World*, Maro Itoje and Ardie Savea spoke of the need for the sport to leverage its biggest asset, the players. That is not such an issue in the women's game, where stars are allowed to shine. And they did in New Zealand, with players arguably the biggest marketing tool for the sport. Tui has been the breakout star. One of life's characters, her interviews often go viral while she uses her social media channels to great effect. Tui is a one-woman PR machine but it's authentic too. She would often be talking to fans and signing autographs more than an hour after the final whistle, and that level of engagement with those paying to watch is only going to encourage them to return.

"You're bringing in a different type of fan. Getting new people into the sport – that's important"

1.7m

The **peak TV audience** for ITV's coverage of the final, which kicked off at 6.30am UK time

As Sweeney said, the men could learn from the women: "They are really accessible. The men's game tends to be a bit more serious, intense and structured. They (the women) want to engage and promote the game."

What was also noticeable throughout the tournament, as it has been at women's Tests on this side of the world, was the make-up of the crowd – younger, families, a more balanced gender mix. Rugby always talks about growing the game and reaching new audiences; the World Cup did that.

Air waves Abbie Ward rises highest at a lineout during the final

PICS Getty Images

"This has really kicked off more interest in the women's game," says Sweeney. "New Zealanders were saying that 70% of fans in the stadium (for the final) were new fans... They're not old diehard fans, you're bringing in a very different type of fan now. Getting new people into the sport – that's important."

All indications are that there will be a big crowd at Twickenham for the England-France Women's Six Nations game next year, as the RFU builds towards its goal of an 82,000 sellout for the RWC 2025 final. If the Red Roses can capture the minds of the public just as the Black Ferns have, that target should be reached.

There's still a long way to go in the women's game – it is not yet profitable for starters – but things are on the right track. And it has already come so far. This is where it seems fitting to give the final word to Tui, who summed up that progress so well during the tournament.

"In 2010 nobody knew who the Black Ferns were. We were told we'd never be paid. We were told we'd never play at Eden Park. We were told women's rugby didn't matter. And now here we are, 12 years later, and Eden Park is sold out. It's a really special moment. Kiwis are normally so laidback we are lying down but we've finally got up."

➡

Auckland fortress
New Zealand have now won all three World Cup finals staged at Eden Park

Four things that must change for RWC 2025

1 THE FIXTURES

Let's ditch the triple headers and back individual matches to fill venues, with games across England and matches throughout the week to maintain momentum instead of peaks and troughs. As RFU CEO Bill Sweeney told us: "I'd rather see individual games around the country. The ability in 2025 to host around the country and take the World Cup to multiple areas is really going to help grow participation for us."

2 THE SCHEDULING

The kick-off times this year were, on the whole, awful for European audiences. Of course, 2025 will suit the continent where the biggest women's rugby audience is, but those on the other side of the world, as well as in North America, must be considered when it comes to scheduling. So evening fixtures for Australia and New Zealand to hit breakfast time Down Under. And let's avoid major men's matches clashing with the women's tournament (the All Blacks-Black Ferns overlap on quarter-finals weekend was the epitome of bad planning).

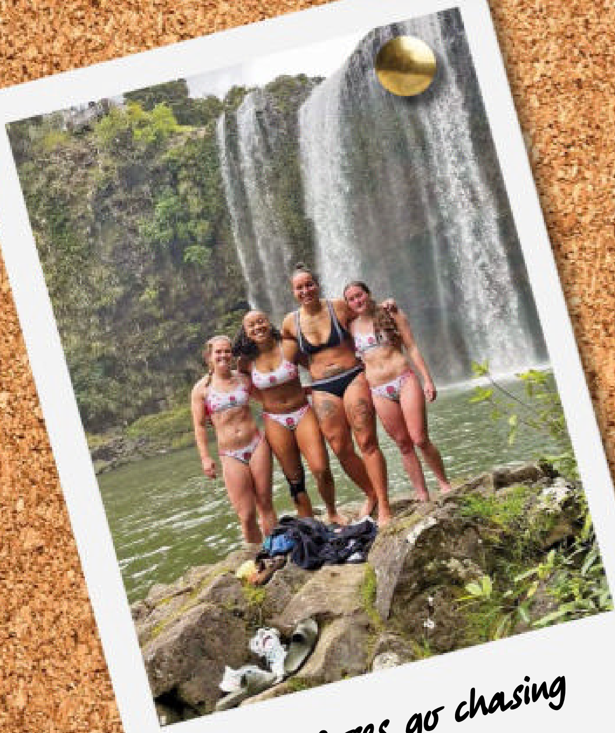
3 THE INVESTMENT

Money, money, money! This World Cup has shown the gains that can be made when unions invest in their women's programmes and more countries need to do this in the lead-up to 2025 to improve standards and competitiveness. Whether it's World Rugby designating funds, unions giving a greater share of resources to their women's teams or better leveraging the commercial opportunities, the product will only get better with more investment.

4 THE COACHES

World Rugby has set a target of having 40% female coaches at the next World Cup, so significant strides need to be made in this area. There was only one female head coach at RWC 2022 (Japan's Lesley McKenzie) and a handful of other women involved in the back-room teams. Yes, the intern scheme meant more women gained experience but there also needs to be more faith placed in the growing number of young coaches coming through. It's not just about seeing women playing and refereeing, they need to be in coaching and decision-making roles too. RW

INSIDE THE



Red Roses go chasing waterfalls...

Strike a pose! These Springbok women aren't camera-shy

Selfie expression from the Black Ferns

The Scots get poi lessons from NZ PM Jacinda Ardern

USA players enjoy a water recovery session

Asinate Serevi with some of the vocal Fiji fans

WORLD CUP

Words **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **FIR, Getty Images, JFRU, RFU, SARU, SRU, USA Rugby & WRU**

Here's a glimpse of what players got up to off the field in NZ – and over the following pages we bring you stories from the tournament

Oarsome! The Japan squad go paddle boarding

French lessons at Eden Park for deaf students

If you go down to the woods today… you'll find SA

Azzurre players head to the 'rockies'

Four English smiles – and a photo bomber

It's fun and games in the sea for Wales

umbro
GILBERT
SIRIUS

Worth a punt
Harrison is the best kicker in the women's game

ZOE HARRISON

The fly-half started every match for England at the World Cup

SHARK DIVING, bungee jumping, parachuting... Zoe Harrison describes herself as a thrill-seeker, albeit that she can't currently partake in the items on her to-do list because of the injury risk involved. So how does she get thrills on the pitch? "You never know what they're going to throw at you," the England fly-half says of opponents. "I like that mental side of the game."

For the most part, Harrison and the Red Roses dealt with all that was thrown at them at the World Cup, only coming unstuck in the final against New Zealand when they were reduced to 14 players for more than an hour. Bar a couple of wayward kicks at Eden Park, Harrison was one of England's most consistent performers at the tournament and was the only Red Rose to start every game.

The race is on
Getting stuck into training

THE EVER PRESENT

> "It's scary to think where she can go. She's got years to develop into an even better player"

The 24-year-old has nailed down the No 10 shirt and become a key figure since Katy Daley-Mclean retired in late 2020. "As soon as Katy left, it allowed me to have that voice and take leadership of the team," she says of moving out of the 2014 World Cup winner's shadow.

She watches a fair bit of men's rugby, particularly Saracens and the Gallagher Premiership, and takes pointers from the likes of Owen Farrell, Dan Biggar and Marcus Smith on "how they play and the control they have".

Yet it's a lesser-known male player who has been pivotal to Harrison's progress. Josh Sharp, formerly of Ampthill and now of Letchworth, is engaged to Harrison's Saracens team-mate Lotte Clapp and for coming up to two years he has spent a couple of hours every Friday afternoon working with Harrison on her kicking.

"A lot of others coach kicking as the boys' style but actually the girls' style is completely different and he knew that," she says. "He worked with how I liked to kick, just tweaked it a bit, how I set up and so on, and we've gone from there."

So how has Sharp turned Harrison into the best kicker in the women's game? The key is focusing on the individual rather than a specific technique.

"I've had kicking coaches in the past who have one method of coaching or style they coach, one mould fits all, but kicking is so individualised," says Sharp. "It's looking at how you naturally strike the ball, honing in on what suits you and making that consistent. Because everyone is so different in terms of how they strike the ball, it's finding out what feels right for you and making that consistent.

"There are varying factors like the weather, how the body feels, how tired the muscles are, but if you feel confident behind the ball you'll naturally find a consistent strike. It's breaking down what feels right, then understanding how to translate that over and over again."

As for the difference between men and women kicking, Sharp admits this is something of a generalisation but it's all in the hips. While men tend to come straight onto the ball, women get a better strike if they're more rounded. "Everyone is an individual. Holly Aitchison probably kicks straighter than Zo but is still more rounded than a male counterpart."

Harrison can easily make 55 metres kicking out of hand and is crucial in giving England the territory from which to launch their driving lineout. And her game is set to develop still further by the time the next World Cup gets underway.

As Sarah Hunter says: "Over the past 18 months she's become a world-class ten. As a ten you have to run the game and have the confidence to do it. She's come into her own on that. It's a scary thought to think where she can go. She's got years ahead of her to develop into an even better player."

It's now about kicking on, if you'll excuse the pun, for RWC 2025 on home soil.

FACT FILE

Age 24 (14 April 1998)
Born Tring, Herts
Position Fly-half
Club Saracens
Height 5ft 8in
Weight 11st 7lb
England caps 46
Instagram handle @zoeharrison123

LAURIAN JOHANNES-HAUPT

The former prop is leading the way for female coaches in SA

LAURIAN Johannes-Haupt may be the first but she doesn't want to be the last. When she took charge of South Africa's U20 women's team in 2019, she became the first woman to take charge of a national team in the country, but she says: "To me, it's not about being the first, it's about creating opportunities for the next and the next generation to come. I'm showing there are opportunities for the next person to come through."

Before we look at the opportunities that have come her way, let's rewind to the start of her rugby career. She first became enamoured with the oval ball during the 1995 men's World Cup and remembers watching the final with her parents, but she didn't take up the sport until nearly a decade later when at the University of Western Cape.

"I told my dad I needed a pair of boots for a friend when they were actually for me, then I invited him to come to see my 'friend' in action," she says of revealing her new hobby to her family.

A prop, she was quick to move up the ranks and represented South Africa at the 2010 World Cup before moving into coaching four years later, doing that alongside her career as a teacher. "I wanted to give back to rugby after what rugby had given me and it was an opportunity to inspire young girls to play the game."

She was invited onto World Rugby's Coaching Internship Programme in late 2020. The scheme has seen up-and-coming coaches embedded with World Cup teams to learn in a high-performance environment as well as take part in workshops in NZ.

Johannes-Haupt says: "It's not only learning from coaches in the team but also from other international coaches and those with different philosophies.

"I've learnt a lot from not only Stanley (Raubenheimer, head coach) and Eddie (Myners, forwards coach) but from the Springboks coaches who have come in and helped us a lot, like Daan Human and Deon Davids."

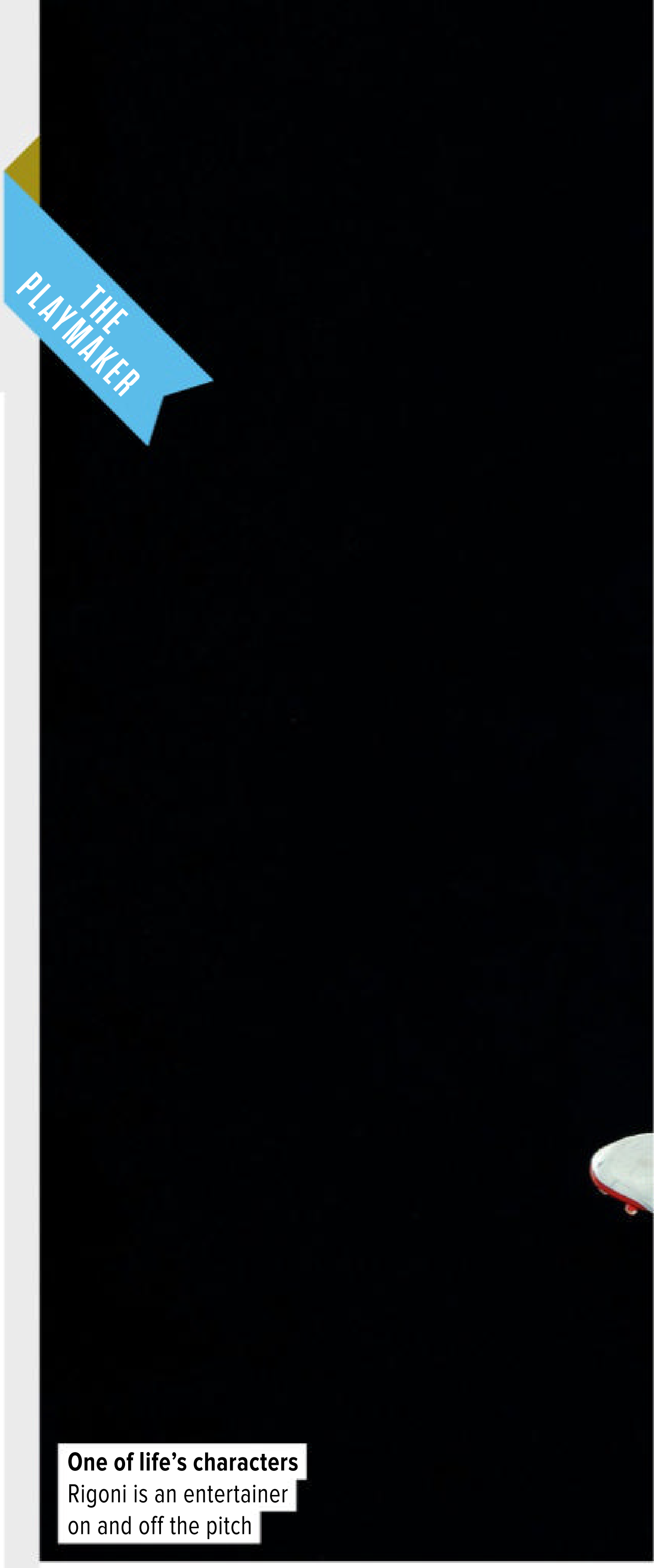
While her role at the World Cup was to focus on the breakdowns and assist Myners with the pack, she also picked up advice on the player management aspect, such as relaying feedback and dealing with different personalities.

So what about her personal goals going forward? "I want to get involved in male club rugby in Cape Town, just to learn something different. And ultimately I want to be a (senior) national team coach."

DID YOU KNOW?

Other ex-Test players on the intern scheme include Gaëlle Mignot (France), Maria Gallo (Canada) and Aya Nakajima (Japan).

First step
Johannes-Haupt is on the coaching ladder



One of life's characters
Rigoni is an entertainer on and off the pitch

AS BEATRICE RIGONI sits down in the foyer of Italy's central Auckland hotel, she shows off a new tattoo on her ankle. It's a Maori design representing the different members of her family and is the latest in her ink collection.

She also has a group of elephants on her back, 'Mo Cuishle' on her left arm from the film *Million Dollar Baby* and an Italian cartoon character on her leg. Yet it's the '12' on the side of her right wrist that has the most significance to her rugby career.

It's a tribute to Paola Zangirolami, a former team-mate at club (Valsugana) and country who played the same position as Rigoni and was a guiding influence. "Without Paola I wouldn't be the person I am now," says Rigoni.

"She helped me with a lot of things outside the pitch and in rugby. When

BEATRICE RIGONI

The *Azzurre* inside-centre is one of the most exciting players in the game

I was younger I tried to do something different (in games), but not every coach liked it. Now I take risks only if I'm sure it is worth it. Paola said, 'You must be sure that it is not a risk, that you can do it'."

That's not to say Rigoni has reined in all her natural instincts. She is one of the game's most exciting players (Carlos Spencer was an early inspiration) and can splinter defences with runs and passes; even as a child she preferred to set up a team-mate than score herself.

FACT FILE

Age 27 (1 Aug 1995)
Born Abano Terme
Position Centre
Club Valsugana Rugby Padova
Height 5ft 7in
Weight 11st
Italy caps 61
Insta @bearigoni

In the same way that Rigoni likes to build Lego models in her spare time, she also likes to build attacks. Italy favour a ball-in-hand style and Rigoni is at the heart of that approach.

"We are trying to find different ways to score a try and win a game," says the 27-year-old. "It's building our skills so we can play the best rugby we can and changing our mindset. We try to move the ball rather than just being physical."

It's not only her playmaking skills that go viral; there was a clip of her pulling a snack out of her sock mid-game at the World Cup. "I usually put almonds in my sock in case I need energy, have a dip," she explains, "but there were none in the changing room so I put candy in."

The *Azzurre* have made history as the first Italy team – male or female – to reach the World Cup quarter-finals. After being knocked out by France, Rigoni was already looking ahead to 2025.

"The more we're feeling bad, the more motivation we have to go up next time. We started our journey today."

Hot stepper Finding a hole in the USA's defence

MEGUMI ABE

The Japanese scrum-half was the smallest player at the tournament in New Zealand

THE FIRST time Megumi Abe caught *Rugby World*'s eye she was driving back a Canadian at a breakdown in Japan's opening World Cup match. Of course, such counter-rucks are commonplace in a game, but it stood out purely for the size differential. Abe – at 4ft 9in and 8st 5lb – was the smallest player at this World Cup but she was getting the better of someone at least a foot taller and significantly heavier. How does that phrase go again? It's not the size of the dog in the fight…

Her national coach, Lesley McKenzie, uses the words "aggressive in contact" to describe her first-choice scrum-half while Abe laughs when asked if she enjoys the physicality of the sport. "Yes, I do," she responds, with a wide grin. "I love proving that even though I'm small there's nothing I can't do."

Ever since she took up the game aged ten, she has been looking to prove herself. First, it was against the boys in her team, then at high school as she fought to make the girls' A team, and now on the Test stage as one of rugby's smallest players (USA's Olivia Ortiz is the same height but 2kg heavier).

Aaron Smith is another of the game's more diminutive players – the All Blacks' most-capped back has said in the past: "I'm proof that you can be a small athlete and still add to a game I love" – and Abe cites the fellow scrum-half as one of her favourite players.

"When we played the Black Ferns at Eden Park (pre-World Cup), the All Blacks were playing Australia and I saw Aaron Smith there. I wanted to go and ask for his signature but I didn't!" she says shyly.

Day job Abe works in restaurant marketing

FACT FILE

Age 24 (28 Apr 1998)
Born Ehime, Shikoku
Position Scrum-half
Club Arukas Queen Kumagaya
Height 4ft 9in
Weight 8st 5lb
Japan caps 12

THE POCKET DYNAMO

Quick and slick
Abe in passing mode

While Japan were winless at the World Cup, they became fans' favourites with their fast and furious style. An extremely well-drilled side, when they secured quick ball Abe was able to fire out slick passes to a back-line packed with running threats (check the YouTube highlights of USA-Japan for a brilliant long-range try from Komachi Imakugi).

Abe talks of the team focusing on the detail as they look to counter the size and physicality of other teams, and recognises the need for an upturn in results to grow the women's game in Japan, just as the success of the men's team has.

“Men's rugby is getting pretty popular but women's not so much. Having better results is important. Unless we're able to do that, we won't have more players who want to play rugby in the first place.”

KAREN BUCHOLZ

The former Wallaroo was part of the neon team helping fans

KAREN BUCHOLZ describes herself as “a sporting tragic”. If there is a major sporting event nearby, expect the Australian to be volunteering at it. Before donning a neon green jacket for this tournament, she had been involved in the Sydney Olympics in 2000, RWC 2003 and the 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast. She's already earmarked the 2032 Olympics in Brisbane as another she would like to volunteer for.

Getting the nod for this year's event was not a simple process. As well as the application and interview she had to go through, the fact she is based in Brisbane threw up a few unknowns as to whether she would be able to come across given Covid regulations. In the end, it worked out well, with the trip across the Tasman also allowing her and her partner to catch up with his family in New Zealand.

So what is it about volunteering she loves so much? “It's just fantastic to be involved and give back to sport. I've had so much enjoyment and camaraderie and built massive friendships, and seeing the enjoyment of people coming to rugby is great.”

Bucholz has not only been involved from the sidelines at major tournaments; she has competed at the top level too. She played for the Wallaroos at RWC 1998, represented Queensland Reds at state level and has gone on to be a successful cyclist in masters' events.

Having been involved in the third women's World Cup and first ‘official’ tournament, she is well placed to assess how far the game has come in the subsequent 24 years. “It's just going from strength to strength,” says the former scrum-half. “In 1998 we were working full-time jobs. It was an honour to represent my country at that World Cup and the Netherlands put on a splendid event, but to now look at the professionalism of teams is brilliant. The 15s programme has really grown over the past 25 to 30 years.”

Bucholz also had the honour of presenting the current Wallaroos with their jerseys ahead of their opening match against New Zealand. She jokes that she thought she was a lucky omen as Australia raced into a 17-0 lead but the hosts came back strongly.

Still, the speech she gave the team about “having each other's backs and enjoying the moment” is as true now as it was when she played.

DID YOU KNOW?

From more than 700 applications, 400 volunteers were chosen for the World Cup, working across the three venues.

RUGBY WORLD CUP NEW ZEALAND 2021 PLAYING IN 2022
AUSTRALIA v NEW ZEALAND 8 OCTOBER 2022 AUCKLAND
THE VOLUNTEER

Golden moment
Iliseva Batibasaga receives her jersey from Bucholz

EMMA ORR

The 19-year-old Scotland centre explains how farming has helped her rugby

MUTTON BUSTING: An event held at rodeos similar to bull riding, in which children ride or race sheep. According to Wikipedia. It's quite a niche topic to bring up in a rugby interview but we've been tipped off that Emma Orr used to do something similar on the family farm, although not at a competitive level.

"When I was really, really young, I'd be stuck on the back of a sheep and go up the hill," she says. "It was many hours of fun. Then one day I fell off, hit my knee on a stone and it ended in tears!"

Sheep crop up again when we talk about her defence, which was so impressive at the World Cup. For someone who played her first match at outside-centre – arguably the most difficult position to defend in rugby – earlier this year, and on her Scotland debut at that, Orr has adapted quickly. In the pool game against Australia, which ended in a heart-breaking defeat like so many Scotland fixtures, she shut down a number of Wallaroos attacks with the ability to know when to blitz out of the line and hit the ball-carrier.

As well as hailing her team-mates for aiding her decision-making, Orr points to the advantages of her farming background. "Having to catch sheep definitely helped in some way with my defence," the teenager laughs.

"I've played at ten, full-back and now 13, which is my favourite. There's maybe not as much pressure controlling a game as at ten, but you're more involved than 15, particularly in defence, which is my favourite part. With attack at 13, there's a lot of space and the amount of ball you get you can create something, which is something I love doing in attack.

"It's a very hard place to defend in that channel. I'm very lucky that the centre inside and the winger outside speak to me a lot to give me confidence to help read things, so it's not an individual thing. I speak to those inside and outside, so there's the confidence to know you're making the right decision to press on that person or not."

The World Cup, and the entirety of 2022 in fairness, has been something of a whirlwind for Orr. Plucked from second division club Biggar, she made her debut in the Six Nations just days before her 19th birthday, started two Tests in New Zealand (against Australia and the Black Ferns) and was also part of the sevens squad at the Commonwealth Games.

Rugby has long been part of her life, though. She started playing at around the age of seven, joining in with the boys at Biggar, where her dad has been president and her two older brothers and her sister have played. She took a break for a couple of years because "none of the boys would pass to me" before getting back involved in a girls' set-up at her high school and then a girls' team at the club in her mid-teens.

The four siblings would play two-on-two on the farm and she cites her brother, Biggar full-back Robbie, as the player she looks up to the most, saying deferentially: "We play a similar style, he is just ten times more skilful than I am."

> "It's a very hard place to defend but I speak to those around me to give me confidence to read things"

She currently lives in Edinburgh, where she is studying agriculture, but goes home most weekends – "I'm a country girl, it's where I belong" – and the farming work ethic meant she was keeping up with her lectures while on the other side of the world.

"We all had to muck in," she says of her childhood on a farm with 1,600 sheep and 70 cows. "My parents say they never had farm workers because they had so many kids to help! I do think farming has given me a lot; it's getting stuck in and not being afraid to get my hands dirty, to do the hard graft. It's a good mindset."

And one that bodes well for her rugby career too.

THE TEENAGE TITAN

Wrong-footed Orr escapes the Wallaroos' clutches

FACT FILE

Age 19 (6 April 2003)
Born Wishaw
Position Centre
Club Biggar
Height 5ft 8in
Weight 11st 13lb
Scotland caps Six

Test of nerve Bevan (facing) is mobbed after her kick

THE PARENTS

THE BEVANS

Watching your daughter on the international stage can be a nervy experience

A **KICK TO** win it! The scores were level at 15-15, there were 85 minutes on the clock and Wales had been awarded a penalty after putting together 24 phases in the closing stages of their opener against Scotland.

Keira Bevan stepped up to the tee. All Welsh fans would have been nervous but what about her parents watching in the stands at Northland Events Centre?

All dressed up Liz Bevan in her dragon outfit

"My nerves were in shreds, I couldn't even look," says mum Liz.

Dad Richard adds: "The wind was all over the place so I was thinking, 'Take it now' because the wind had dropped. It's all about the connection, hitting it right, and I was confident it was going over."

As the ball sailed between the posts and Bevan was engulfed by team-mates, Liz had tears streaming down her face.

Bevan later said of the pressure kick: "I just imagined I was back at Pontarddulais, kicking with my dad."

A full-back for Aberavon and Swansea in the 1980s, Richard would often head down to the local pitch with Bevan to work on her goalkicking and box kicking – and those years of practice have paid off. "She's mentally strong and really competitive," he says of the daughter he's watched in all but one of her 48 Tests. Liz and Keira have matching tattoos of 'VIII.II.XV' to mark her debut aged 17 in 2015.

Just as Bevan & Co had their World Cup kit, so did the travelling cohort of friends and family. Natalia John's mum, Nova, arranged matching red coats for them all: 'Cymru' on the back, then the three feathers and 'Women's Rugby World Cup' on the chest.

On match days, though, Liz has her own wardrobe, with several items in rotation: a sheep headdress, a hairband featuring daffodils, a green dragon suit over which she wears a Wales jersey...

Whatever the outfit and despite Wales losing in the quarters, that match-winning kick will live long in the memory.

DID YOU KNOW?

Liz Bevan takes a Welsh flag to matches in memory of former player Elli Norkett, who died in 2017 – it has '#EN14' written on it

PORTIA WOODMAN

The Black Ferns winger is now the top try-scorer in Rugby World Cup history

PORTIA WOODMAN has always been an incredible try-scorer. Take her sevens career. She's dotted down 205 times on the World Series – 48 more than anyone else!

In 15s, she was the top try-scorer at the 2017 World Cup in Ireland with 13, including eight against Hong Kong. Then at this year's tournament on home soil she overtook Jonah Lomu to become New Zealand's top World Cup try-scorer with a hat-trick against Australia and then eclipsed former England captain Sue Day's mark of 19 RWC tries with a double against Wales in the quarter-final.

That second try against the Welsh, where she brushed off or evaded a handful of defenders, was Woodman's 20th in World Cups and puts her out in front in the record books at men's and women's tournaments.

Sadly, she was forced off early in the final after a sickening head collision with Lydia Thompson, which saw the England wing sent off. By then she had already made her mark on the tournament.

"She's a once-in-a-generation player," says Day, who only found out she held the RWC record 24 hours before it was broken on her 50th birthday! "She's a player who has everything. She's famous for her finishing ability and out-and-out gas, but she's got it all – strength, defence, evasion. She's a brilliant player, really humble and, from the outside looking in, seems to love scoring tries but also feel that the main thing is doing her job for the team."

FACT FILE

Age 31 (12 July 1991)
Born Auckland
Position Wing
Franchise Chiefs
Height 5ft 7in
Weight 12st 4lb
NZ caps 25
Instagram handle @porshwoodman

Ritual
Doing the haka

Day recognises that high-profile players like Woodman are sure to attract people to the game, to inspire the next generation. "We need stars and she's a star. Stars are what little boys and little girls are turning on the telly for and looking at."

Perhaps one of those youngsters watching Woodman's try-scoring feats will break the record in a couple of decades' time, although as the women's game becomes more competitive, it's less likely that players will notch big tallies in individual matches. It may well be a record that stands the test of time...

THE RECORD BREAKER

Lethal runner
Woodman puts the pedal down at the World Cup

MANAÉ FELEU

The France lock hails from the tiny island of Futuna

WALLIS AND FUTUNA in the South Pacific has a population of less than 12,000 as of the last census. Yet three players hailing from the tiny islands have played for France this year.

While Yoram Moefana and Sipili Falatea have run out for the men's side, Manaé Feleu was part of the women's World Cup squad – a decade or so on from playing sevens together. "Twice a year we played a big tournament called *Le Petit Motu*," explains Feleu. "Once we won this tournament when I was playing nine and Yoram was ten. That was a pretty unexpected pair!"

Both her parents were sporty – her dad, Nisie, was a decathlete and her mum, Valérie, a pentathlete – but it was RWC 2007 that engaged Nisie in rugby and as the only two PE teachers on Futuna they introduced the sport to children at school. "Kids loved it," he says, "so I decided to create three clubs so we could make tournaments every weekend."

Feleu was quick to catch the rugby bug: "I loved it, especially tackling. The boys were scared to tackle but I loved it straightaway. It was easy to make people fall."

Her rugby education ramped up when she followed her older brother, Niue, in going to school in New Zealand. She spent three years at Havelock North and while there she first played 15s.

When the family moved to France and she started playing for Dijon, she was called into the national U20s set-up before making her France debut as a teenager against England in 2020. She didn't add to her caps tally until this year's Six Nations.

Her game time at the World Cup was limited but as her father says: "I'm happy she's experiencing high-level sport. I told her she was living something exceptional. She was complaining about not playing enough. I said, 'How many girls would have loved to be where you stand?'"

The tournament also gave her a chance to catch up with old friends. "Boarding school creates bonds that last forever," she says. "This World Cup is special, reconnecting to my roots."

Her role in the national team is likely to grow over the next few years and that presents challenges of its own as she juggles her rugby aspirations with a medicine degree – she is four years into nine years of study to become a doctor. Expect her to tackle those challenges with aplomb.

FACT FILE

Age 22 (3 Feb 2000)
Born Futuna
Position Lock
Club Grenoble
Height 5ft 11in
Weight 12st 10lb
France caps Five
Insta @manae_feleu

THE ISLAND PEARL

In the frame
Feleu is part of France's next generation

THE STALWART

Burst at the seams
Beukeboom breaks in the lead-up to her try v England

TYSON BEUKEBOOM is recalling how rugby was first explained to her. "My cousin was saying, 'You pass the ball backwards and run forwards, and people hit you and you can hit them'. I was like, 'On purpose? Amazing!'"

She had been playing ice hockey but with body-checks banned in the female game, her sporting aggression usually led to penalties rather than high-fives. Rugby gave her an opportunity to embrace physicality and she has done that throughout a career that saw her become Canada's second most-capped female player during the World Cup.

Her sporting success shouldn't be a surprise given her family background – her dad and uncle played pro hockey, she has cousins who have represented Canada in rugby and

TYSON BEUKEBOOM

Get to know Canada's second most-capped women's player of all time

others who have competed in water polo at the Olympics. Yet while dad Jeff was paid to perform on the ice and Brent and Matt Beukeboom were pro rugby players, Tyson has had to pay to play at Test level for much of her career.

Take the lead-up to her first World Cup in 2014, where Canada lost the final to England. She calculated that she spent $15,000 on training, travel and tours from her debut the previous year to the tournament itself (RWC costs are covered by World Rugby).

FACT FILE

Age 31 (10 Mar 1991)
Born Edmonton
Position Lock
Club Cowichan Piggies
Height 5ft 11in
Weight 12st 11lb
Canada caps 56

While Rugby Canada now provides more investment, they were still the last amateur team standing at this year's tournament and players self-funded a few additional camps put on outside the union's provision. As for the future, Beukeboom says: "I'd love centralisation to happen, for us to have a home base and everyone to be there. It's hard at this point to imagine it being full-time, but even for us to be together for chunks of the year would be beneficial."

It was Beukeboom's break and try in this year's semi-final that ensured a nervy last ten minutes for England as the amateurs went toe-to-toe with the pros, and the back-five forward has no plans to call time on her career.

"I don't feel like a more senior player, but to pass on the knowledge we have and to be able to help the younger generation get stronger... That's the goal, to make the programme better."

Let's hope that by RWC 2025 the financial investment going into that programme is equal to the players'.

Sterling silver The 2014 Canada World Cup squad

Carry on
Ashenbrucker tries to escape Canada's clutches

EVELYN ASHENBRUCKER

From being told she'd never play again to representing her country on a global stage

FOR MANY players, a serious injury can spell an end to any international aspirations. For Evelyn Ashenbrucker, it was the opposite: she didn't receive international recognition until after being told she'd never play again.

In 2018, the second-row was having an operation to repair muscle damage from a dislocated elbow and a surgical error severed a nerve. She was told that, from the bicep down, her left arm would never be fully functional and she would need to relearn how to brush her teeth, hold a steering wheel, tie her shoelaces... A rugby return was not on the cards, it wasn't even in the deck.

“It took me a year to turn a doorknob,” the 32-year-old explains of the recovery process. “I had to focus full-time on being able to function as normally as I could.”

Show of strength
Taking on Japan
THE COMEBACK STORY

> “It took a year to turn a doorknob. I had to focus on being able to function as normally as I could”

Ashenbrucker wasn't prepared to give up on rugby, though, and set herself a goal of having one last season with San Diego Surfers so “I could finish on my terms”. It was then, in late 2019, that she caught the eye of the USA coaches, although with Covid she didn't make her debut until this year's Pacific Four Series and was then part of the squad that reached the World Cup quarter-finals.

There are still struggles. Part of her hand has no feeling (she has caught it in a door before and not realised), so it's quite remarkable that she is playing international sport. “I'm vulnerable to stress or not getting enough sleep,” she says. “If I'm fatigued I'll lose feeling a bit or my hand won't move as well. I'll get frustrated if I'm dropping the ball but it's a little out of my control.”

Had Ashenbrucker taken a different route to basketball tryouts when starting university, she may not have discovered rugby. She was called over by a group of women training because she was tall and never made it to the court. A stint playing in Italy followed upon graduating (“I saw on Facebook that a team was looking for a No 8 and I speak Italian as I went there as an exchange student”) and she has since played in the Women's Premier League (WPL). That is quite a commitment, as being a women's rugby player in the States is expensive.

The WPL features ten teams from across the country in two conferences, with home-and-away matches. The travel costs involved – flights, hotels, hire cars – rack up and it's not unusual for players to spend several thousand dollars a season.

“It's a testament that they really love rugby,” says Ashenbrucker, who works as a leadership consultant and is also doing a PhD in organisational psychology. “As it stands it's pay out of pocket. I'm fortunate that I've always had a job, or two, and have been able to make it work, while the (club) alumni try to be as generous as they can, particularly with younger players. It is tough; it's not sustainable.”

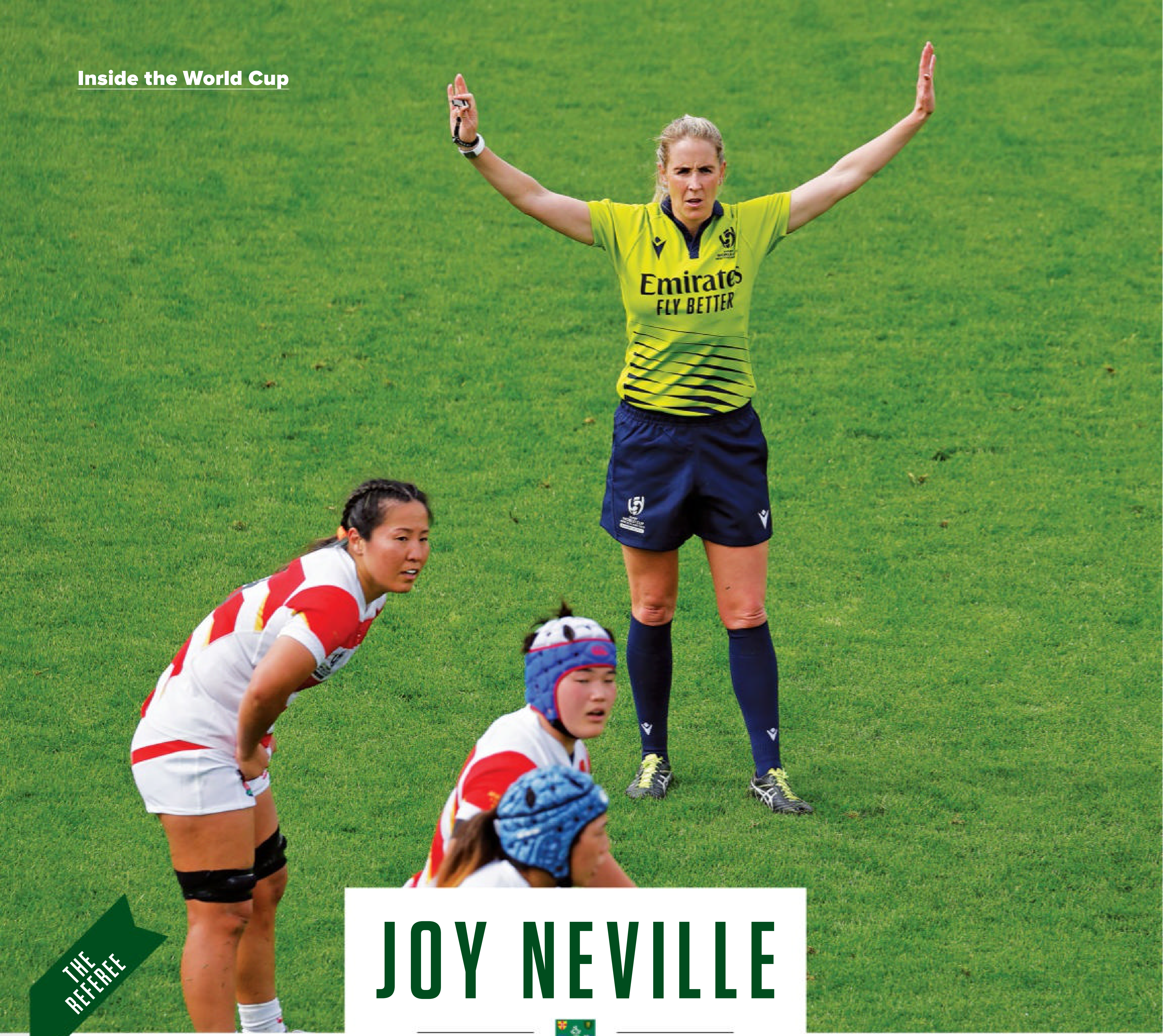
A lot of USA players currently ply their trade in England's Premier 15s and Ashenbrucker hopes that there will soon be a league in the States attracting overseas stars. “There's no reason why a country as sport-heavy as America can't be a destination for the top players in the world. It just comes down to money.

“If they ever get major financial investment for the domestic game, there are hundreds to thousands of young, strong, athletic women who will thrive and make US rugby great. It's getting them the support they need.”

That's the future. Right now, she can reflect on her pride in the most unlikely of comeback stories, although she says: “When I look around, every single person in the squad has a story and I'm in awe of what they've had to sacrifice to achieve this. As much as I'm proud of myself, I'm even prouder of everyone else.”

FACT FILE

Age 32 (6 Aug 1990)
Born Humboldt County, California
Position Lock
Club SD Surfers
Height 5ft 10in
Weight 14st 12lb
USA caps Seven



THE REFEREE

JOY NEVILLE

The former Ireland captain has returned to refereeing after having a baby

REFEREES ARE a competitive bunch. Joy Neville jests that Hollie Davidson didn't speak to her for an hour after being beaten in a quiz. They are friends again now, the camaraderie in the officials' camp strong.

It needs to be, with the rise of social media also leading to an increase in criticism of officials. Neville is concerned that such abuse could put off those considering a refereeing career.

She says: "We put a lot more pressure on ourselves as a group; we know we're there to create a platform for teams to play, so it's important for us to be physically and mentally in the best shape. So pressure comes internally and externally. You have to have mental strength, to filter negative stuff.

"I don't like social media. It's used as a weapon by people and I don't like the lack of accountability. I'm nearly 40, I have a great support structure at home, but I do worry about young people who don't have that life experience. I do really think social media is dangerous."

Team work With Clara Munarini in NZ

While online trolls are a change for the worse, there have also been those for the better. Take the recent World Cup. It's the fifth Neville has been involved in, first as a player and then as a referee, and she can see that the women's game is "growing phenomenally".

There's also the fact that she's been able to return to top-level refereeing after having a baby, something she wasn't sure would be possible. She points to Amy Perrett as the "see it, be it" example of a ref having children, and credits the IRFU's Dudley Phillips and David Nucifora for their

DID YOU KNOW?

For more info on becoming a referee, visit passport.world.rugby/officiating or your national union's website.

In charge
Neville officiates Japan v Canada

support. “I didn’t perceive it possible to have a family and come back, but my bosses said, ‘Why not?’”

She continued training until she was seven months pregnant and was back working on her fitness a month after the birth. She also refereed at a local level while on maternity leave to aid her match sharpness. Physically, she says she’s now “fitter than I’ve ever been”, but there are “tough” mental challenges, like being away from 16-month-old son Alfie and wife Simona while in New Zealand.

It was while she was pregnant that she started working as a TMO and she’s now in the running to be one of the five chosen for France 2023. “That would be a massive honour.”

There are clearly pressures as a referee, but Neville is keen to sign off by saying: “I’d encourage others to take up the whistle and give it a go.”

SULITA WAISEGA

A homemade highlights reel earned this teen a Fiji call-up

RUGBY IS a little different in the Netherlands, where you can play in mixed teams until the age of 18 – and for Sulita Waisega that proved a huge advantage. While there were opportunities to join girls’ teams, she opted to stay with boys.

“I liked it, it helped me with rugby and the physical side to be playing with boys,” says Waisega, who followed her brothers into rugby and started playing at 11 at RC Delft before joining Haagsche Rugby Club. “I wanted more competition, so I stayed with the boys rather than going to another club.”

So how did a teenager playing rugby in Holland end up in Fiji’s World Cup squad? When Waisega, who moved to the Netherlands aged three after her dad got a job in the country, displayed an aptitude for the sport, her father got in touch with one of his former team-mates, Inoke Male, who was part of the Fijiana coaching team. A highlights reel – put together by Waisega herself – so impressed the coaches that within a few weeks she was called up for this year’s Oceania Championship. Her performances there put her firmly in the World Cup frame; a bolter if ever there was one.

“I wrote my last paper for high school, then flew over and went straight into camp,” she says. “It was hard in the beginning because the weather was so hot and the training was very different. It was a big challenge but I’m happy I did it. Now I’m loving it. The girls are like my sisters and have been very good to me.”

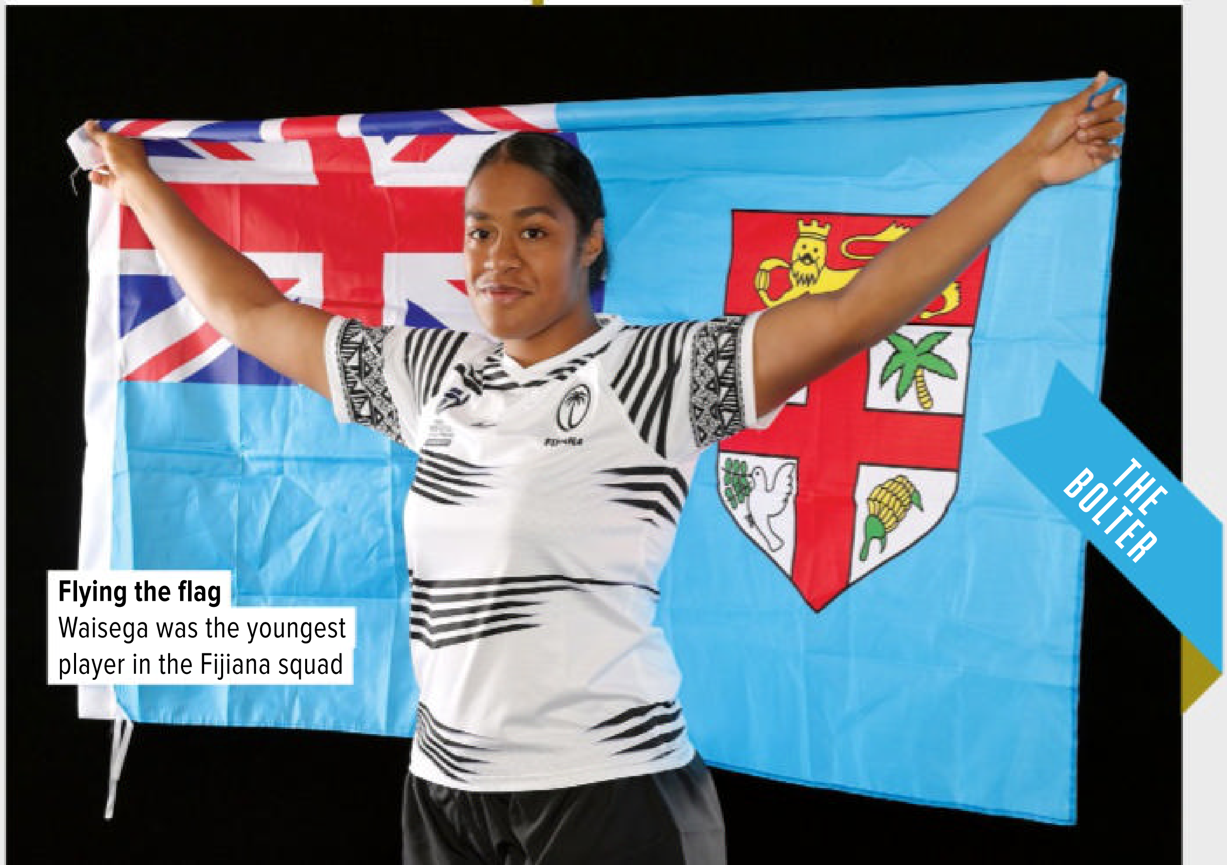
The 18-year-old started at blindside in the opening-day defeat by England and in Fijiana’s historic first RWC win, over South Africa. “Playing England, I’d watched those girls on TV when New Zealand played in the UK last year, so to play against them in such a short space of time… It’s an unreal feeling coming from the Netherlands and playing in a World Cup, getting to play on the biggest stage.”

Fiji’s head coach Senirusi Seruvakula has been impressed by how quickly she has adapted to Test rugby and is predicting a big future if she can build on her strong foundations. “She’s still young and has a lot of experience to get, to keep learning the basics, but she has a long career ahead of her.”

Waisega is now weighing up options for a degree (“something in sport”) and a possible playing deal overseas. “I’ll see what doors open,” she says. Perhaps it’s time for another highlights reel!

FACT FILE

Age 18 (16 Mar 2004)
Born Suva
Position Back-row
Club Haagsche RC
Height 5ft 10in
Weight 13st 3lb
Fiji caps Six



Flying the flag
Waisega was the youngest player in the Fijiana squad

Charging Bull
Kurt-Lee Arendse and the Bulls are part of this season's Champions Cup

STEPHEN JONES

Rugby's most outspoken and influential journalist

"To shoehorn in South African teams is a gamble"

This season's European competitions include sides from the southern hemisphere – and Stephen Jones fears their involvement could see the Champions Cup lose its lustre

IT IS almost Euro time again, with action beginning in the Heineken Champions Cup and the Challenge Cup on the weekend of 9-11 December. So off we go, still clattering around looking for some precision and sanity in the season structure and European format – this year, it's new, part exciting, part disturbing.

The fixture list, with 24 teams in the Champions Cup and 18 in the Challenge Cup, hints at great rugby but also causes concern that some of the games may not be all they are cracked up to be.

And the new format? To make it successful, less of a colossal gamble, it needs marketeers to get seriously stuck in, and let's pray they do. The average marketing operation selling rugby to the paying public would have difficulty giving away Rolls-Royces.

In a sense, both competitions are exciting but also the system is shambolic. When you dive into week one you find that Racing 92 are playing Leinster, the (Natal) Sharks are hosting Harlequins and Sale Sharks face Ulster. In week two, there is Leicester v Clermont and Lyon v Saracens.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Email rugbyworld letters@futurenet.com

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These are tasty fixtures, but with the distances involved due to the importation of the South African teams, there is no guarantee whatsoever that away teams will be fielding their best players.

And the whole thing causes headaches. Why have South Africa suddenly become part of Europe? And why do people find it

➡

➡ necessary to crowbar different leagues together when those different leagues should be left on their own to thrive or to try to thrive, prior to joining a bigger pan-Europe competition?

No one, I venture to suggest, is more enamoured of South African rugby and the country itself than I. But to just grab some teams who are either box-office or wrongly presumed to be, and shoehorn them into a different competition in a different hemisphere is a gamble, it is untidy and makes the rather dishevelled shape of the United Rugby Championship even more dishevelled.

The grand old tournament was struggling – and God bless Heineken, who have stayed solid as sponsors all the way through the formative years, the glory years and in the years of Covid and confusion. They are hanging on in there.

The ideal format for me was to properly run and revive what they already had.

Away day
Will Quins fans head to Durban on the first weekend?

MAIN IMAGE Rodger Bosch/AFP/Getty Images. **PICS** Getty Images & Inpho

Too much of the old needle and fascination and bite – and weekender prospects for fans – had diminished.

Europe used to have the feel of a gigantic step up from normal league action but no longer. The organisers seem to change with every season in everything bar their anonymity and failure to stand up and speak out.

Yes, they had to do something, but using the URC as a baseline and then welding on extras to it is just ham-fisted. It's silly and inappropriate. Yes, the URC was struggling and has added some form of glamour by bringing in the Sharks, Stormers, Bulls and Lions.

We must applaud the boldness of the organisers of the URC and the new Heineken Cup. But the Charge of the Light Brigade was boldness too. I have not detected any great surge of crowds or interest in the URC with its African edge, and the number of long journeys will do nothing whatsoever for player welfare or family life. Or away fans.

As well as the unwieldy, clunky nature of the participation of the South Africa teams, there are more basic drawbacks. Clearly, there are going to be only tiny knots of away supporters at the majority of the games – a little like the Rugby League World Cup where the cameras for the lesser games keep showing the same three alleged travelling fans.

I said when the URC began that its value and status would be decided if the full Springbok squad came up north to play the majority of games with their clubs and the likes of the Leinster giants played most of the games in South Africa. So let's keep an eye out for Siya Kolisi, Johnny Sexton and the real grandees crossing the equator.

But it has not happened, so we are left with pockets of success in the tournament and also pockets where the only upbeat notes were contained in over-optimistic media releases written by some sporting and modern-day equivalent of a tribe mentioned in of one of John Betjeman's poems:

"So spake the brewer's PRO,
A man who really ought to know,
For he is paid for playing so.
And then he kindly gave to me
A lovely coloured booklet free."

(That'll be the media guide, then).

So we will be fascinated when the Euro rounds come along to see who really wants it, who will bring their best team along and chase the title down.

The old format used to have six pool games but now there are just four. After that, this time there is the round of the last 16, which I found a successful addition last season. It sprang from rearranging the tournament after Covid but was compelling. The quarter-finals come after that and then later in the season come the semi-finals and final.

Pulling the strings Johnny Sexton is still the main man for Leinster

One important point is that there is reasonable time between the quarters and the semi-finals, of three weeks. Previously, one of the major drawbacks of the competition has been that the semi-final round came so soon on the back of the quarters, it gave no one the chance to market them. As a result, those matches often looked a little pale and wan and unloved.

> “Compared to football’s European Everest, the Champions League, rugby isn’t even in the foothills”

The organisers should not have resisted the temptation to run both semi-finals on the same weekend in the same stadium because the double header is exactly what the French Top 14 did last season, and there was a wonderful teeming weekend in Nice. Somewhere reasonably accessible for the semis would have been easier to market well in advance rather than waiting until the quarter-finals are done.

The winners? So hard to say. Leinster, Saracens and La Rochelle, the holders, have all begun their domestic seasons superbly. Ronan O’Gara, who guided La Rochelle so brilliantly last season, must be on the verge now of an international coaching post. The Sharks from Durban are going well. Racing 92, so close for so long, really do need a major title.

There are some excellent teams in the Challenge Cup, too, an event for which Wasps may well have started favourites until the financial roof caved in on them.

So let us recap. The new format to Europe is a bold try, with a bewildering number of countries involved, and by no means all of them European. There are no Italians in the top event, and still no developments in either of the cups in helping clubs of other nations progress – for instance, those in Spain or Georgia or Russia or Romania – and all of those, last time I looked, are in Europe.

Good luck to everyone, and many fans of my acquaintance strongly maintain that these days it is more fun going abroad to support your club team than going through the cost and pomposity and crush of international games.

But rugby is still thrashing around trying to find its formats. It is now 12 years since we at *Rugby World* set out a brilliant structure for a European season that was devised by Terry Burwell, an inspired administrator at the RFU. It allowed all three domestic competitions – the Premiership, Top 14 and Celtic League, as it then was – to function properly with a major final in each event; then we went on to a Superbowl, the climax of the season on the last weekend, when the Championship of Europe was decided, possibly in a gigantic stadium somewhere fresh.

How boring that after clever work in staging the European finals weekend in Lyon, Bilbao and Marseille, they have taken the 2023 final back to the Aviva Stadium in Dublin. Nothing against Ireland, and I do like that stadium, but how breathtakingly lacking in vision.

Say the South African teams have a great season, how many people will be rushing to the Aviva Stadium to watch two of them in a final? Or somewhere else to watch them in a semi? Ditto a final in, say, Pretoria between Ulster and Harlequins.

Nothing is decided. Let us pray for a brilliant opening round, this time in both events. Let us hope also that the Challenge Cup comes through strongly. By now, the tournament should be right up there, and still rising.

Compared to football’s European Everest, the Champions League, rugby is not even in the foothills. It seems more of a culture clash, a culture shock, this time rather than a happy cultural mélange. It could lose out because, especially with the long distances for away games, teams may decide to concentrate on domestic leagues and not send their finest.

If the new season is played flat-out, this new-style event has its attractions. Rugby needs good news and vivid colour. Let’s wish the Intercontinental Conglomerate Cup the very best.

SPOTLIGHT ON

Words **Alan Pearey** // Pictures **Getty Images**

ROB DU PREEZ

Sale are ready to make a big impact in Europe, says their South African fly-half

Age 29 (30 July 1993)
Born Durban, SA
Position Fly-half/centre
Club Sale Sharks
Height 6ft 4in
Weight 15st 4lb
South Africa caps One
Instagram handle
@robertjamesdupreez

ROB DU PREEZ is just back from a team recovery day at a facility used by Man City. Saunas, hot and cold baths, one or two meetings. No prizes for guessing what was discussed. Sale's fine start to the season had been halted by losses to Harlequins and Saracens in which try-scoring opportunities were squandered. Opting for driving mauls when Sarries had Elliot Daly and Nick Tompkins in the sin-bin came under scrutiny.

Bossing it
Du Preez tries to fox London Irish's Will Joseph

"It's easy to look at decisions in hindsight," says fly-half du Preez, 29. "In one maul when we were 15 to their 13, we mauled them all the way to the line but knocked on. If we score we'd be going 'great call'. In another one, Tommy Taylor broke off and was deemed to have crawled. Again, if we score there it's a different discussion.

"We did maul a lot but we felt we had them there. But yes, we did speak about mixing it up a bit; we had two more backs, could we have done something else? If that situation arises again we'll hopefully do better."

The mauling fits the stereotype, Sale branded as a team based on physicality and defence. Coming into November, five of the top six Premiership players for dominant tackle contacts were from Sale, headed by Rob's kid brother Dan. Yet there's more to them than that.

"People respect our physicality but this year we've built on that. We've moved the ball a bit more. Giving our bigger men more holes to run into instead of running into other big men, if that makes sense.

"We've evolved. Our endeavour has evolved. We've got a lot more balance with the way we play in terms of our kick-pass-run ratio."

The team are responding to Alex Sanderson, in his second full season as DoR and someone who must surely come into the England reckoning one day. "The way he engages with the team in meetings is brilliant," says du Preez. "He has a holistic view, it's not all about rugby. We've looked more at our connections as team-mates, how we can make the mind stronger, so we do a lot of mind work, we call it Mind Gym. Because we all know the body comes after the mind."

Pushing 6ft 4in – only Blair Kinghorn springs to mind as a taller ten – he's come a long way since sitting fifth in line for the Sharks No 10 shirt as an academy recruit in Durban. He won the Currie Cup with the franchise in 2018, a year after winning it with Western Province, and it's a high point in a career that includes a Test cap against Wales. Brothers Dan and Jean-Luc played beside him, and dad Robert, a Springbok No 9 in the Nineties, was coach.

"It was a really good moment for us as a family. My father coaches now in Italy (at Rugby Parma) and we speak all the time. He'll always give feedback after games. When I was younger I was a scrum-half like him. I only moved to fly-half at 17. So he helped me a lot with those skills, scrum-half skills."

He's a more rounded player now, with fewer errors. He knows how to unlock defences and manage a game in wet weather. We saw that in the win against Gloucester that got Sale back on track.

He has an "open dialogue" with George Ford, the two previewing and reviewing games together, and it may be du Preez is shifted to midfield once the Englishman returns from an Achilles injury. Du Preez has lots of experience there.

"As a 13 a lot of your attention is on communication and giving your ten options. And as a ten it's the opposite, you want your 13 to give you options. I understand that now. How important help is because as a ten you have a lot on your plate."

Du Preez became a proud father this year to daughter Romee. If time permits, he enjoys playing golf with Cobus Wiese and Coenie Oosthuizen ("I played a lot with Faf, he was the best"). His Sale contract runs until 2025 but he hopes to stay beyond that. He has properties here and in Africa and a desire to coach one day.

His immediate thoughts concern the Champions Cup, which now features South African sides. Sale face Ulster and Toulouse and by mid-November all three occupied top-two league spots – a mini 'pool of death' if ever there was one.

"The Champions Cup is the best of the best and now we're adding three great teams. I'm sure teams are really excited about travelling to South Africa, and the South Africans are excited about coming here to play the best in Europe.

"Ulster and Toulouse will be very tough. But if you had, say, Leinster or La Rochelle, the Stormers or the Sharks, there are no easy games at all. It's going to be outstanding."

Sale have reached the last eight in each of the past two years but there's a belief better is to come.

"Even last year's quarter-final (at Racing) was a step up from the year before at La Rochelle. So we are trending in the right direction and there's no reason why we can't get past the quarter-finals. We'd love to get one step, maybe two steps, further." RW

MY TOP 3 ▼

FLY-HALVES

DAN CARTER
"Won two World Cups, great attacking game, solid defence. Has the mindset of a winner"

JONNY WILKINSON
"A perfectionist. The ultimate professional. Again, great kicking, solid on defence"

OWEN FARRELL
"An ultra competitor. He hates losing any battles, which shows in the way he defends"

f

WORDS **TOM ENGLISH** // MAIN PICTURE **DAN SHERIDAN/INPHO**

Let the rebuild begin! **Munster** are backing young, local

WHEN MUNSTER hosted South Africa A in front of 41,000 people in Cork in the second week of November, the portents of doom around the province were inescapable. This was a local team that had won just two of their first seven games in the United Rugby Championship; a side that would go up against the gnarled tourists stripped of seasoned internationals, so no Peter O'Mahony and no Tadhg Beirne, no Conor Murray and no Joey Carbery, no Keith Earls and no Andrew Conway and, of course, no RG Snyman, Munster's lesser-spotted Springbok, who has spent more time on the treatment table than the training ground since arriving in Munster two years ago.

The anxiety around the province's results was obvious. Yes, the club was rebuilding on a platform of youth. Yes again, some of the rugby they'd been ➡

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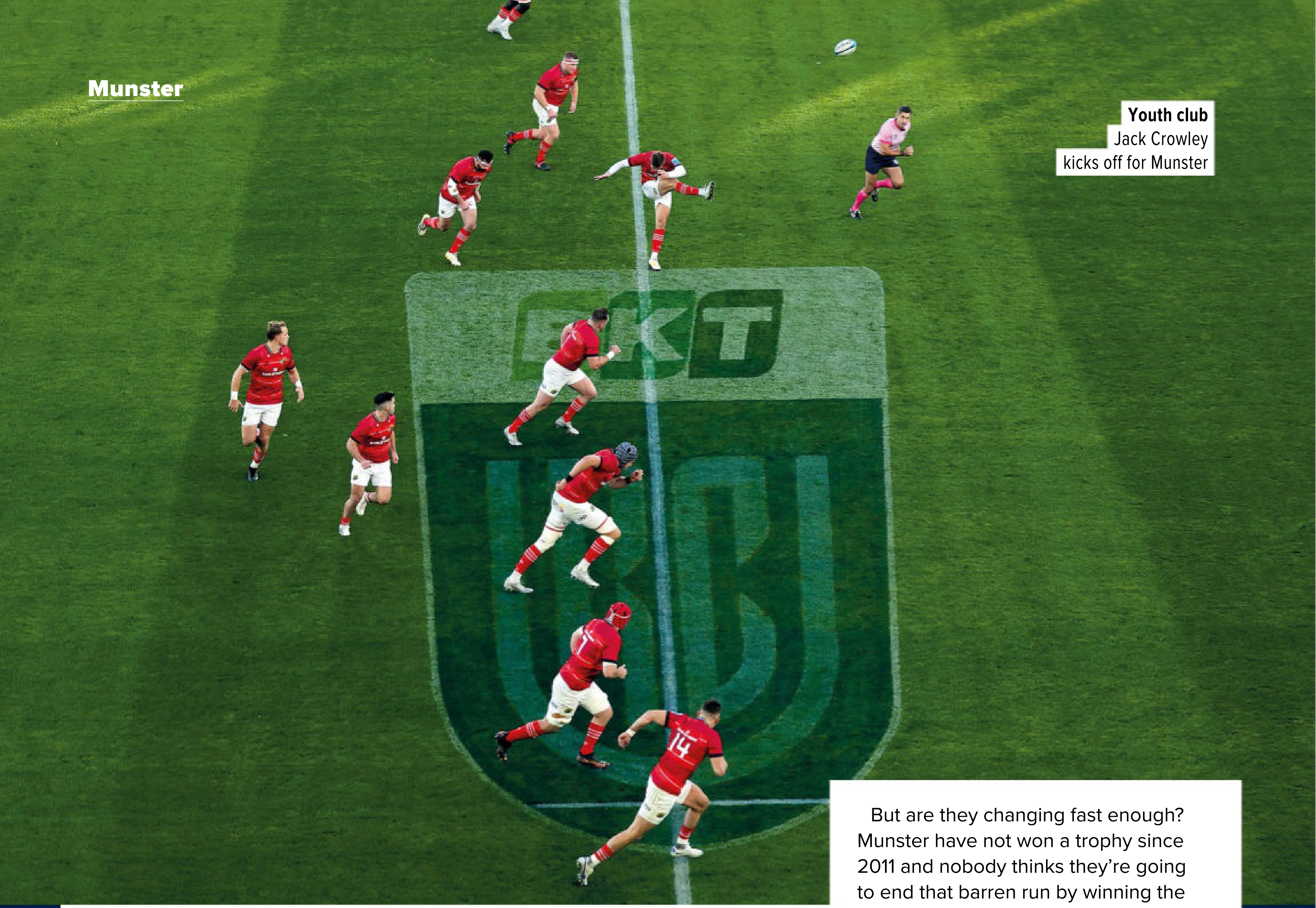
Relight the re

players to revive the team and re-engage a fanbase that's endured a decade of frustration



Youth club Jack Crowley kicks off for Munster

➡ playing under Graham Rowntree was encouraging and light years ahead of the muck routinely served up by his predecessor Johann van Graan in terms of ambition and attacking intent.

But this was a threadbare Munster on the night with a 22-year-old rookie at fly-half, a callow front row, a teenager in the second row, another 22-year-old in the back row and a bench that included players aged 19, 20, 22 and 22.

An annihilation was forecast, but that's not what happened. Munster secured a famous victory. The Cork night was full of noise and passion and colour. In an immensely difficult season that has Munster fans fearing their team has made such a bad start to the URC that they may not recover to qualify for next season's Champions Cup, this was epic and unexpected. A glorious ambush. Classic Munster, in other words.

Watching it unfold was Denis Leamy, a giant of the good times. Leamy was a Munster schoolboy player who lived the dream when making his senior debut at 19 before becoming a European champion in 2006 at the age of 24 and a European champion again in 2008 at the age of 26. After a brief stint on the Leinster coaching ticket, Leamy is now Munster's defence coach.

He is also a wise counsel on the state of Munster in the wake of the unhappy reign of van Graan, a conservative coach who seemed to have an aversion to giving youth its chance. Rowntree, Leamy and Mike Prendergast, another former Munster player who has returned to the fold as a coach after impressive years with Racing in France, are polar opposites.

"Bringing in young players is definitely the answer," says Leamy, and everything that happened against South Africa A would back up his point. "With a brand like Munster we want Munster-born players in the team, we want interest around the province, guys from different counties and regions wearing the jersey."

That's the vision. Josh Wycherley, the 23-year-old loosehead. Tom Ahern, the 22-year-old lock, and his second-row partner Edwin Edogbo, who is just 19. Alex Kendellen, 21, and John Hodnett, 23, in the back row. Jack Crowley, 22, at fly-half, Patrick Campbell, 20, on the wing. There are others. It's not quite a Leinster-esque talent factory but there are players of promise in there. Ten Munster players were selected for an Emerging Ireland tour of South Africa in the autumn. Things are changing.

But are they changing fast enough? Munster have not won a trophy since 2011 and nobody thinks they're going to end that barren run by winning the upcoming Champions Cup. The near misses have been painful. Since they last won silverware, Munster have lost five URC (or URC equivalent) semi-finals and three finals. They've also lost five European Cup semis. Last season they lost to Toulouse in the quarter-final after a penalty shoot-out. They've cornered the market on angst-ridden exits.

In Munster, expectation rubs shoulders with reality. There is an acceptance that a rebuild is required and may bear fruit down the line but there's also an impatience in the present, made worse by the sight of not just Leinster ahead of them now but also Ulster, who are improving all the time.

Dealing with all of this is part of the gig – and not many have more experience of this world than Leamy. "There's always going to be high expectations and I'd never shy away from it. It's where you want to be. We believe strongly that we're on the right road. We believe that our hard work will bring results. The young players give us massive hope.

"I have a background of working with young players since I retired and these guys we have are really, really good.

> **"Young players are the answer. We want Munster-born players in the side, interest around the province"**

There's no doubt in my mind that some of them will be big stars.

"There's still great passion for the team. Everywhere you go. In Munster, in Ireland and way further afield, there are people willing us on. That's brilliant but there's also a responsibility that comes with it. I grew up with Munster. It was all I knew. People talk about Munster's glory days, I was there. It was my life and don't let anybody tell you that we didn't get criticised or that we weren't pulled up in cafés and bars by people who maybe thought we needed to do better.

"I'm very aware of the standards and the expectations and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. It's an incredible honour to be involved and if there's a slight bit of pressure, so be it."

Leamy balks when he hears people talking about trophies. "It's talk you need to be careful of. You need to earn the right to talk about silverware, you need to be making finals. Where we are at right now is developing a new brand of rugby for Munster and a new team that's a mixture of our experienced internationals and our young prospects.

"Don't get me wrong, this season has been tough. Through injuries and international commitments we've already used something like 55 players. In seven games. Normally, if we used 55 over the season you'd be saying that's a lot. Fluidity in our sessions and on match days has been difficult, along with trying to change our defensive system, our attack system, while introducing different ideas around our set-piece. We're changing a lot of things."

Leamy has a supporter in his old Munster team-mate Alan Quinlan. They won two European Cups together and Quinlan appreciates the job the new coaching regime is trying to do at Thomond Park.

"The young players have to be trusted," he says. "I think for a number of years getting to semi-finals and finals stifled young players but it's different now. Munster tried the superstars route when they signed Damian de Allende and Snyman and it didn't work. De Allende was outstanding but the overall team wasn't strong enough. They've been very, very unlucky with Snyman.

"Put a fit Snyman into a full-strength Munster team with all these young guys pushing through and you have a really healthy situation. The problem is that under the previous coaches the young lads didn't get a chance. If Crowley was at Leinster he'd have played 50 games already. The new coaches are addressing that now. The results are frustrating but talking to people I think there's a general realisation that this has to happen and if it means short-term pain for gain down the line, then that's the way it needs to be.

"Munster fans know what's what. You can't pull the wool over their eyes. There was a disillusionment at times about the previous regime, but they can relate to Denis and Mike and Ian Costello, who's doing a great job with the academy. There's a disappointment around results but an optimism, too. They can see what the plan is. They see positive signs. As a team, we've always been about spirit and confrontation and having a blast at the opposition and maybe we went away from that in the last few years. Munster weren't good to watch, let's be honest."

The more Munster people you talk to, the more you hear about getting the right foundations in place. Quinlan says the same. It was just that in his day. His first European Cup-winning team had 13 Munster-reared players in the starting line-up. His second had 12. In 2006 the home-grown boys were joined by Shaun Payne and Trevor Halstead. In 2008 the outsiders were Doug Howlett, Rua Tipoki and Lifeimi Mafi.

"You can go back to John Langford and Jim Williams as well. The core group was topped up by class guys who took us to the next level. It's not easy, but that is where they need to go and hopefully that's where they are going to go. A chequebook is not going to fix this."

Leamy tells a story about the night Munster lost to Ulster in the URC. On his way home he stopped off in a pub in the middle of nowhere in Tipperary, ordered a pint and sat away in a corner by himself. "I was thinking about the match and what happened, then I hear these guys talking about it and their analysis was excellent. They'd watched the game on the telly and they were breaking it down with such passion. I thought to myself, 'Here I am, in a pub in rural Tipp and there's lads talking about the team with such feeling and knowledge'.

"You don't get that everywhere, do you? It's a special club. I knew that since I was a young fella, but little moments like that remind me how lucky I am to be involved again and how determined I am to get things right." RW

Coaching brief
Mike Prendergast and Denis Leamy

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

DID YOU KNOW?

Munster's recent 28-14 win over South Africa A is not their first international scalp. They beat the All Blacks in 1978 and the Wallabies in 2010.

European champions
O'Callaghan, O'Connell and Quinlan in 2008

SPOTLIGHT ON

Age 32 (5 Apr 1990)
Born Gloucester
Position Wing
Region Ospreys
Height 6ft 6in
Weight 16st 4lb
Wales caps 53
Instagram @acuthbert14

Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Getty Images**

ALEX CUTHBERT

The Ospreys winger knows exactly what it's like to win a Champions Cup

STATS Correct as of 18.11.22

HE LEARNT at the feet of the master. Well, kind of. Dad – affectionately known as 'Tuck Box' – would play at No 8 at Westbury, and there was one effective move with him picking from the base and feeding the flying Tuck Box Jr, Alex Cuthbert, at outside-half. Alex's brother would be at centre too, so there was a whole crew of Cuthberts to contend with.

There have been a few different high numbers on Alex's back in his early career, but the tactic back then was usually to 'get the ball to the fastest bloke'. Which sounds simplistic but after going through the tumble dryer of Welsh and Test rugby, and then a stint with Exeter Chiefs before returning home, simplifying seems smart.

Touchline dancer
In full flight for Ospreys against Stormers in the URC

"Leaving Wales is one of the best experiences I've had, in terms of me just seeing the game differently," Cuthbert tells *Rugby World*. "Earlier, I was trying to get really good at loads of different things but I just simplified it for myself. I knew that if I carried the ball well, chased kicks and competed in the air, in theory those are probably the three main things international wingers should base the whole game on.

"Then what comes off it are little extras. So I simplified it and then I guess I just enjoyed that. And the game plan that Exeter had at the time just suited me down to the ground. I started enjoying it a bit more and then having kids put everything in perspective. I don't just think constantly 'rugby, rugby, rugby', whereas before I was thinking all day and all night about it."

He gives an example of going through analysis of his first game for Exeter, with coach Ali Hepher. While Cuthbert picked out loads of errors, Hepher's natural instinct was to pull out all the positive play and consider how to adapt that. It was energising to do.

Today, with the Ospreys, Cuthbert is better at not dwelling on the negatives. He's had too much of that to stomach in his career to date. Let's find light.

So when he was offered a one-year deal with the Ospreys, he did some serious thinking. He had considered that he might finish his playing days in Devon, but a voice squeaked from the back of his mind, "Can I play for Wales again?" He spent four years in the Test wilderness, but he was shy of 50 international caps – a big target of his.

Candidly, the wing also adds of returning to Wales: "It was probably also to come back and do it and have a 'F*** You' to everyone that doubted me, I guess." And so with the Ospreys, he put his new, uncluttered mindset to work on the field. He (we're sorry!) got tucked in.

Yet if we take the idea of perception in this positive light, Cuthbert adds: "It was probably more to myself. I wanted to prove to myself that I was good enough to come back and play for Wales.

"Because I felt like, watching during those three or four years away, I was playing well enough at Exeter to probably be around the squad. To come back and to get myself involved and push for a back-three starting spot. And yeah, I'm probably enjoying it more now, international rugby, than I did before."

Here's to hollowing out the worry. That stilled mind might have proved fertile ground for ideas as Cuthbert isn't just an elite athlete but a business owner too, founding Fitap with Gareth Anscombe – a platform to connect users with gyms, trainers, classes or clubs. The aim is to promote healthier lifestyles and today they have five full-time staff, and some team-mates have invested. He's even doled out a few business cards in the dressing room, he jokes.

New experiences seem to be paying off for the 32-year-old. However, taking on the finest in Europe is nothing new for him and as the Ospreys embark on their journey through the Champions Cup this season, Cuthbert could be a man to call on for advice, having been at Exeter when the club won the competition back in 2020.

"It felt like I joined Exeter when they were at the top of their game and every match felt like a final to every team we played against. So it was just brutal. It was about getting used to that. To be fair to Toby Booth (head coach), we speak a lot to the coaches around what the mindset of the boys was back then, in the week, in the season, the little goals they used to set themselves and stuff. So I've tried to transfer as much as I can to the players and coaches.

"Once you get to the knockout phases it's not far off international rugby, the teams you're playing and the intensity. You just cannot switch off for one second with the way the games are played."

Clarity, focus, play to strengths. Nice and simple.

MY TOP 3 ▼

PASTIMES

FAMILY
"My kids are full-on! I have a two-year-old and a nine-month-old"

GOLF
"I try to play whenever I can – it's rare but my handicap is 14"

HORSE RACING
"I used to ride when I was younger and have a lot of mates in racing now"

CHAMPIONS CUP
LIONAL
montpellier Métropole
ALT

WORDS **PAUL EDDISON** // MAIN PICTURE **LASZLO GECZO/INPHO**

ZACH TO THE FUTURE

With a move back to the Premiership announced – and a return to the England fold the goal – we caught up with Montpellier's **Zach Mercer**

ZACH MERCER was not playing for England in November because of the RFU's policy on selecting overseas players but, thanks to France coach Fabien Galthié, he was not entirely absent from the international scene.

The Montpellier No 8 has clearly made an impression on Galthié, who has even joked with him that he wishes Mercer were French. But their most recent meeting got him playing for another side – with Galthié pulling some strings to secure Mercer a call-up for the Barbarians against an All Blacks XV.

The France coach had enjoyed his own experience with the Barbarians in the summer, overseeing their thumping win against England at Twickenham, and when he heard that Mercer might fancy a crack at playing in the famous black-and-white jersey, he was straight on the phone to make it happen.

Mercer explains: "Fabien was watching Montpellier train and I got speaking to him afterwards. I asked him how he enjoyed coaching the Baa-Baas and he told me that he loved it.

"He mentioned it to the head of the Barbarians about me playing and next thing I knew, they got in touch with me and obviously I bit their hand off. So it's a little weird but the French national team head coach got me the gig.

"I watched the Baa-Baas game in the summer and this one was against the All Blacks – being half-Kiwi myself it was going to be a special environment."

In theory, Mercer could have been playing for the opposition in the encounter at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, which the Baa-Baas won 35-31 with the back-rower scoring a try, by virtue of his dad Gary – a former New Zealand rugby league international. But the reality is that the red rose is his only international objective.

That is the reason why his French adventure was only ever going to last two seasons, even if he admits the success of the first season made it a harder decision than he had imagined.

A summer move to Gloucester will see Mercer become eligible for England once again from 1 July and, after four years in the international wilderness, there is a feeling that Mercer's gamble in moving to France in 2021 may have been a masterstroke.

At the time, he was three years removed from his only England caps – one of the group of players jettisoned after an underwhelming victory over Japan in November 2018 having made his Test debut off the bench against South Africa a week earlier.

Despite impressive performances for Bath, Mercer seemed to be off Eddie Jones's radar, but as the man himself explains, the France move has changed all that. He says: "My overall game has changed on and off the field since I got here. I'm a lot more mature off the field now, I can handle a lot more adversity. I've got a leadership role in the team here, which is something I probably didn't have in England.

Rec-ing ball During his Bath days v Gloucester

First up Mercer won two England caps in 2018, against SA and Japan, but hasn't played a Test since

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

"I think if I'd have stayed in Bath, I probably would have stayed stale, not progressed and developed. I'd have been staying in England just to try to play for England. I was so far away from that at that point that I thought, 'Let's bite the bullet and go and develop myself'. Obviously, a lot of people had reservations about it, saying it wasn't the right decision at such a young age, but I've proved that wrong.

> "I feel like Gloucester emulate the Top 14 with regards to the crowds"

"I believe I've got a better relationship with Eddie than I ever had done because I feel like he respects me a lot more for developing my own game and getting better on and off the field.

"I speak to him maybe once a month. He'll drop me a little message, sometimes it's not even rugby-orientated. It's other stuff and I like that, I like the relationship we have. If I'm speaking about rugby, it's more (England forwards coach) Richard Cockerill, who I speak to probably once a week. He watches my games and we have chats to see how I can develop. When it comes to Eddie, he watches all the rugby, but he trusts Cockers to have that relationship with me."

Mercer's time in France certainly could not have gone better to date. Joining a Montpellier side that had battled relegation the previous year, he starred as they claimed a first-ever French title.

In a league of 130kg behemoths, Mercer's relative lack of size was no disadvantage. Under the guidance of former France boss Philippe Saint-André, he flourished, saving his best for last.

In the Top 14 final at the Stade de France in June, Mercer set up Montpellier's opening try with a silky grubber kick for Arthur Vincent after barely six minutes and then produced a remarkable last-gasp tackle to prevent a try that might have let Castres back into the match. Instead, Montpellier beat the team who had shocked them four years

earlier, sparking celebrations and the best four weeks of Mercer's life to date.

"I was getting married and had to go on a stag do. So I played the final, we won that and then celebrated on the night. The players got the train back to Montpellier and I had to go to Marbella for my stag do. I was there for two days, then came back to get married and then I was in the Maldives on my honeymoon. It was a pretty surreal four weeks."

Not since Jonny Wilkinson in Toulon has an English player made such an immediate impact in France. But this season will be Mercer's last in the Top 14 – for now at least.

He will join Gloucester after being convinced that they are a team on the up by George Skivington, with the tribal nature of the fanbase also a major drawcard, even for a former Bath man.

"I watch the Premiership and I believe that Gloucester are the up-and-coming team. I feel like they are the most exciting team when you look at the squad depth, and the players are young.

"Having one conversation with Skivs, he convinced me. He's a top bloke and a really nice guy; he's honest, brutal as well sometimes, which is important. I think you need that and for me, if I want to keep progressing in my rugby, he's the man to do it.

"Every atmosphere in the Top 14 is amazing and it's something I absolutely love. That is why Gloucester was a big one for me because I feel like they emulate the Top 14 with regards to the crowds. I actually want to have the Shed on my side this time."

Mercer had always been straight with Montpellier president Mohed Altrad, as well as Saint-André, about his plans to stay for two seasons before returning to England. And Altrad has done his best to find a like-for-like replacement in Exeter Chiefs back-rower Sam Simmonds, with Mercer having passed on a few tips to his successor.

"I had a good half-hour conversation with Sam," says Mercer. "He was really good, he had some questions and I answered them honestly. I do think he'll come here and fit in really well. There's a good foreign group here and he'll get on really well with his newborn and his girlfriend, so he'll be right at home.

"Sam has seen what has happened with me this year, coming over to France, and I think you'll see a lot more English players coming over to France to try to progress their game and enjoy rugby."

Mercer cites former Saracens lock Joel Kpoku as another Englishman to have taken the plunge in heading over to the Top 14, helping Lyon lift the European Challenge Cup trophy last year.

While his immediate focus is on finishing strongly at Montpellier, with an increased focus on the Heineken Champions Cup – the club kick off their campaign against London Irish on 9 December and host the Ospreys the following weekend – Mercer is also aware of another final taking place at the Stade de France in less than a year. Even with his form, he knows he faces an uphill battle to crack England's World Cup squad, simply by virtue of the Tests he has been missing.

"I'm not naïve, I know that the World Cup is there and the lads are going to be playing all these games and I won't be. If I got the opportunity to go, it would be a pre-World Cup camp, so I'd have to go in there and show my worth.

"If that happens and I get the opportunity to go into camp, I'll try my best when I'm there. People think I've just come back for the World Cup but I've come back for the years after that and to develop myself. If the World Cup happens, it happens, but I do believe that if I get an opportunity, I'll be in good stead to take it."

Singing the blues
Celebrating a Champions Cup try last season

England outcasts in France

It has been a decade since Tom Palmer was part of the England squad in the 2012 Six Nations while plying his trade for Stade Français in the Top 14. Since then, a number of Englishmen have starred in France at the expense of international honours...

STEFFON ARMITAGE

Perhaps the most famous example. Armitage won five England caps before moving to France where he won three European titles with Toulon, being named European Player of the Season in 2013-14.

NICK ABENDANON

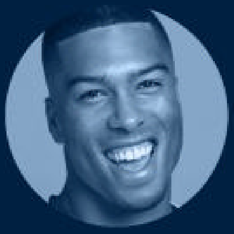
The long-time Bath full-back (above) won just two England caps before becoming a standout for Clermont. He succeeded Armitage as European Player of the Year.

CHRIS ASHTON

In one year in France, Ashton broke the single-season try record by scoring 24 in 23 games for Toulon. He returned to England in 2018 and made an international return after four years away.

ZACH MERCER

Three years after his lone Test start, Mercer moved to Montpellier and helped them to a first Top 14 title in his first season. He was crowned Top 14 Player of the Season.



SPOTLIGHT ON

Age 24 (8 Nov 1998)
Born Reading
Position Wing
Club London Irish
Height 6ft 2in
Weight 15st 4lb
Instagram @benloader

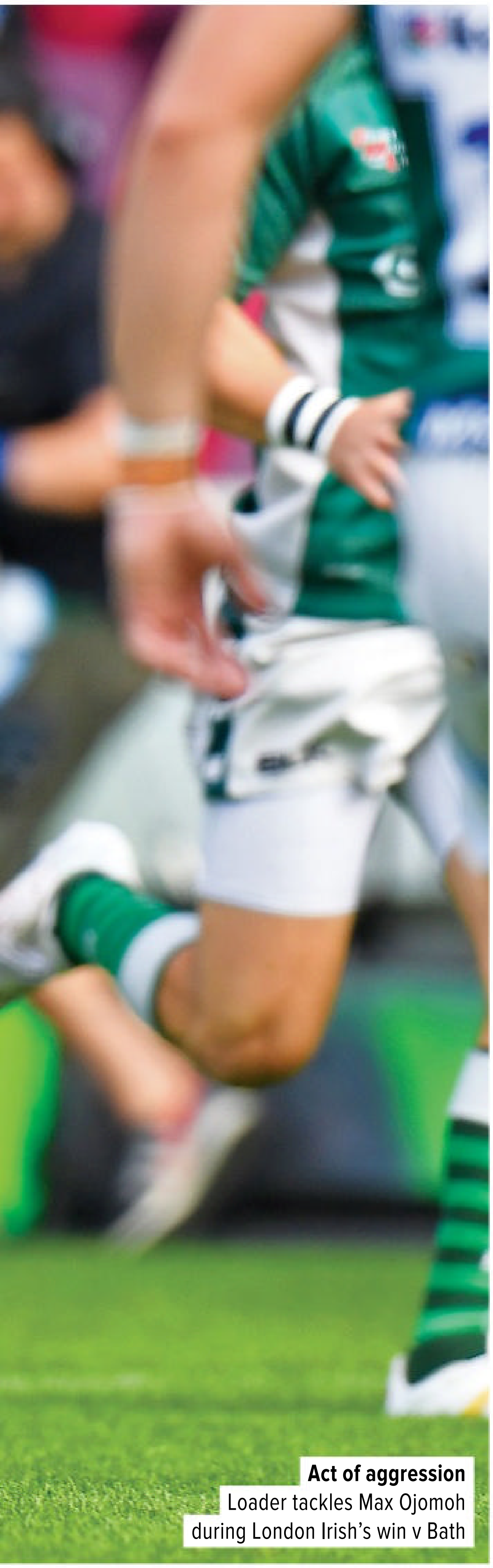
Words **Alan Pearey** // Pictures **Getty Images**

BEN LOADER

The London Irish wing tells RW why he is hitting his straps this season

WINGS. ENGLAND are awash with them. Cokanasiga, Freeman, Murley, May, Nowell and Radwan were named in the wider squad ahead of the New Zealand game, with Malins listed as injured.

Let's throw another name in the mix. Ben Loader is playing better now than when he turned out for an England XV in 2019 against the Barbarians. For evidence, we give you three exhibits from London Irish's defeat at Harlequins.



Act of aggression
Loader tackles Max Ojomoh during London Irish's win v Bath

The gymnastic leap to catch a cross-kick that led to a try for Ben Donnell. A divine 'in and out' to beat Nick David that took your breath away. And the outstanding work-rate that led him to stop Andre Esterhuizen in the corner just moments after tackling Wilco Louw in centre-field.

Should we be surprised by such moments? Not at all, it's what happens when a talented player finally gets a proper run of matches. Knee and shoulder injuries restricted the 24-year-old to nine appearances last season.

"I'm in good form at the moment and that's down to just playing and being able to learn week on week from the games," says Loader. "It's so disruptive getting injured and last season rehabbing, coming back for two games and getting injured again, it's hard to get any flow into your game. Last year was tough but I feel I'm improving every time I go out there."

He has spent a lot of time on his work in the tackle and defensive positioning. It comes more naturally to him now. "And aerial skills, something I've always felt is a strength of mine from attacking kicks. It's not the showcase stuff but it's equally, if not more, important. Being good in the air is a prerequisite for international wingers, and the Premiership too, so it's something that I and the other guys here work hard on.

"The attacking side of things, ball in hand, comes naturally I think. Subtle things (like the feint to beat David) are quite instinctive and in the moment. But these are things you can definitely work on to make strengths into super-strengths. Working in the gym or with other wingers like Ollie (Hassell-Collins), trying new things so that when it gets to the pitch it's automatic and you're not having to think about it."

It's funny to think Loader once quit rugby because he didn't like contact. He took it up at Reading Abbey RFC aged six but stopped before he was nine. He preferred football and cricket back then, and went on to join the Reading FC academy and bowl (very fast) for his county. His brother Danny is a pro footballer for Porto.

But then Loader resumed rugby at Reading School, at 12 or 13, he went back to Abbey and through the county route with Berkshire. And when he went to Wellington College he was hooked.

"Kevin Brennan and Steve Shortland were my school coaches at Wellington and were very influential. It was one of the first serious rugby environments I had been in and they taught me a lot about discipline and what it takes to get to where I am now. Just giving me confidence that if I work hard I could do it."

As he says this, James Lightfoot Brown walks past, another man whose skills coaching and unquenchable support has done so much for young players at Irish.

As a boy, Loader loved watching Topsy Ojo and Sailosi Tagicakibau carving it up on the wings. Jason Robinson was another player who captured his imagination.

In 2016, he went on an England U18 tour to South Africa and spent time in Cape Town working for a charity called Waves for Change, teaching kids from the Soweto township how to surf. He will be back there soon with Irish as they gear up for the Champions Cup.

"We've been trying to get back to this competition for years and it doesn't get any bigger than that," Loader says of the Friday night clash with Montpellier that opens the competition. "Playing the French champions, I'm relishing that challenge. And then Stormers, champions of another competition (URC). It's a great way for us to test ourselves against the best."

Irish have developed an unhappy habit of getting pipped at the death this season. Turning those narrow defeats into wins can only enhance Loader's Test prospects. He's seen club-mates like Tom Pearson, Will Joseph and Henry Arundell head off to England camp, and it would be understandable if he felt a twinge of jealousy. But he scoffs at the notion.

"It's never jealousy. Those are my boys!" he says. "I love seeing those guys doing well. It's more a feeling of 'I wish I was going with them'. I'd love one day to be in camp and look around and have my mates there. It's something I'm striving towards and which motivates me. I try to focus on being a better player every day."

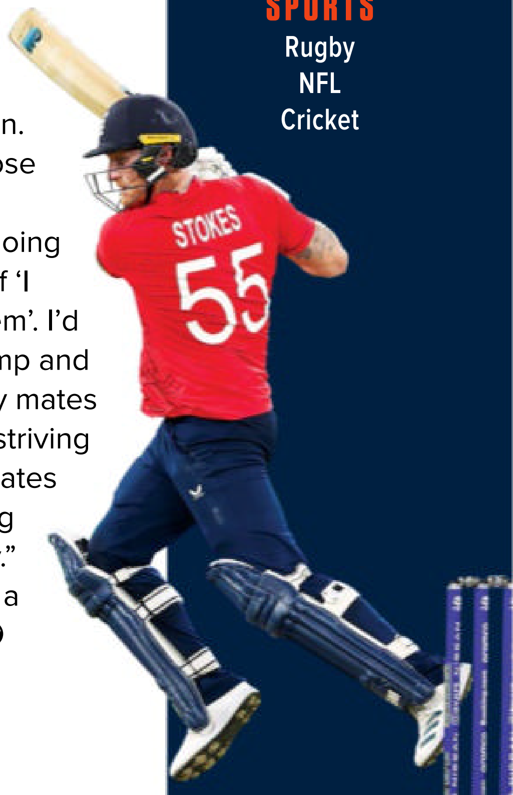
Right now, he's making a pretty good fist of that.

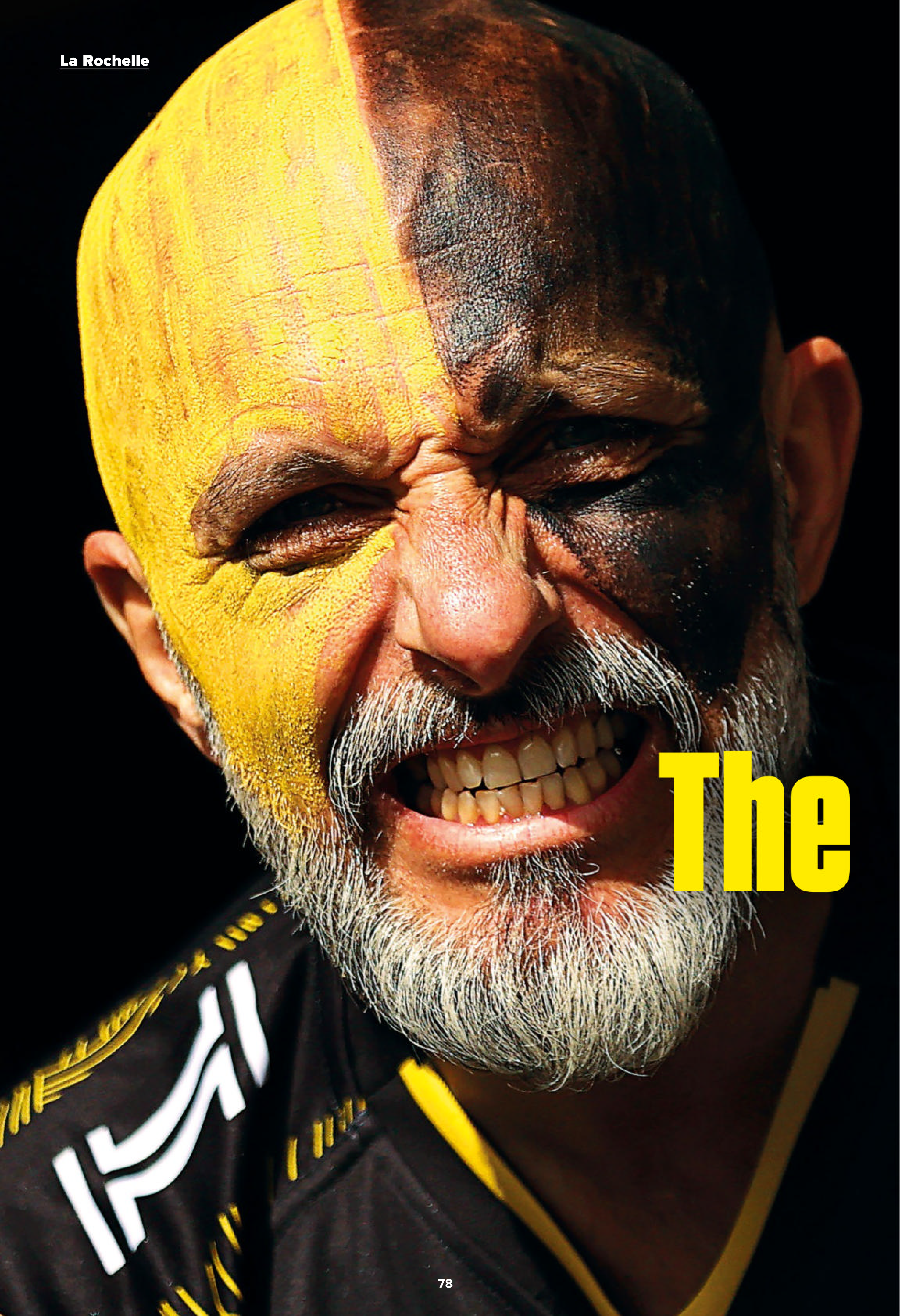
MY TOP 3S ▼

HOLIDAYS
Bali
Lisbon
New York

TV SERIES
Game of Thrones
The Office
Breaking Bad

SPORTS
Rugby
NFL
Cricket





The

The reigning European champions, a Top 14 giant and a club unique amongst peers. This is Stade Rochelais

Rise of La Rochelle

Words **Alan Dymock** // Main Picture **James Crombie /Inpho**

HOW MUCH have things evolved at La Rochelle in recent memory? “Oh yes, some huge change,” says club sporting director Robert Mohr, the German who played from 2002 to 2012 and captained them into the Top 14 for a short stint in 2010.

Stade Rochelais are the reigning champions of Europe. But their recent history is one of steady climbing. In the early Noughties there were a couple of wins in their now-defunct version of a league cup. Then promotion, relegation, another promotion and then more recently a march up the Top 14 table, a European Challenge Cup runners-up medal, a losing final in the Champions Cup and then a town-shuddering win.

According to Mohr, everything has been part of a sustainable plan.

“There are moments when people live in the past – with Jean-Baptiste Élissalde or that generation who stayed so long in the top division. We always got compared to them. So we had to make them forget in a way.

➡ "We changed a lot of coaches. When Serge Milas was coach, we really created an identity where we played a lot – we didn't have exceptional players but we'd been together a long time, so we knew each other very well. And we were always in or near the final of the second division then. Meanwhile, the club progressed a lot as well.

"We built a new stand. We created new sources of revenue. We improved year by year. It took a long time. We got promoted in 2010. Then relegated straightaway. But we created a big fanbase, even in the second division (ProD2). And then it increased with the promotion (to the Top 14) in 2015.

"In between that time though, we wrote our first project for the club, where we fixed ourselves long-term objectives to build the club, to avoid going up and down again. We wanted to be ready when we got promoted, to have a budget that allowed us to stay up; have a stadium that creates its own revenue; to have the staff and also a competitive team, and an academy that allows us to develop talent we can integrate into the first team."

One of the problems back in the day, Mohr says, is that coach turnover meant IP walking out the door every time. So today, the club zero in on having something organic there, where coaches add to what has been built but the club is not wholly dependent on them.

Then we get to a concept of separation – or let's call it a firm focus on 'core competencies'. It came down to a reorganisation where Ronan O'Gara is the head of professional rugby and everything on the playing side comes down to him. But Mohr oversees the development of the project in the middle to long term, including the recruitment of staff and players.

Ownership, though, is a very different thing in La Rochelle. And this is what fans in the English-speaking world might find interesting. Because their fanbase own the club. Vincent Merling has been the president of the club for a whopping 30 years – a quiet man who, almost uniquely amongst the French, doesn't court headlines. He has a successful coffee business of his own and in recent years has stepped back. He is a custodial figure. But he is not the owner.

"The club belongs to every member and that's very important," Mohr adds. "That's not to compare to other projects, I'm not judging. It's just different. And it only works if you're not here for yourself; if you put the club first and do everything for the development of the club. The biggest thing for Vincent is to create sustainability. So we don't do stupid things to win something quickly."

Seen it all Centre-slash-flanker Levani Botia pitched up in 2014

Handling a legacy
Former captain Robert Mohr

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

According to English fly-half Ryan Lamb, who was at the club from 2017 to 2019, Merling understands the need to let others cook, and he'll leave them to it. This is a guy who played for the club many moons ago and who has coached minis and juniors lately. As Lamb adds: "Vincent is approachable and he speaks decent English, which obviously helps – but he wouldn't speak in English unless you're struggling, which I thought was quite good! It just kind of gets you involved with the culture of it."

That culture rubs off. The new training base opening just as Lamb arrived might help grow his appreciation, as would playing the first home game with the new stand as 16,000 maniacs roared themselves hoarse and tried their best to rock it off its axis as the team obliterated Clermont. After all of that, Lamb reflects and tells *Rugby World*: "It's a very special place. To be honest, we're still talking about it now, my family, and we would like to have stayed out there."

There's just something about this seaport on the Atlantic coast. It gets under your skin. Uini Atonio left New Zealand for them in 2011, at just 21. He's still there. Levani Botia arrived in 2014 and is in with the bricks. And more than this, others wax evangelical about it.

"I first heard of La Rochelle in 2014," says two-time World Cup winner Victor Vito, the Kiwi who finished up his career with *les Maritimes*. "Jason Eaton had already left New Zealand and was playing with La Rochelle. I was still playing for the Hurricanes and he came home for a bit and we caught up for a coffee. He told me La Rochelle was a cool little spot. The rugby was getting better, but then a whole bunch of good guys could make something happen.

"I was at least a year off even thinking of leaving New Zealand, with the World

Harbouring ambitions
Last season's parade

Cup the next year, so it was good to know but I'd just keep that in the pipeline for whatever might come around.

"Sure enough, towards the World Cup time in 2015, I decided it was a good time to leave and La Rochelle and Ulster were the two clubs with the best offers. In the end, having Jason Eaton here and seeing some of the rugby I'd seen them playing (on YouTube), I thought it was quite an exciting project to be a part of, not just on the field but off it as well."

He signed off his playing time with a big win for the town, soaking up the Heineken European Cup victory over Leinster. It was a special moment.

But he also believes that La Rochelle have become a great side by playing their way. He talks of a La Rochelle DNA. Willingness to run is mentioned. But in keeping with the evolutionary desire Mohr voices, Vito accepts that kicking prowess has been built in too – a direct response to defences becoming more cohesive in recent years. And of course, you cannot thrive in France without a strong lineout or scrum.

Lamb tells us the style of play is easy to fall into, once you crack the language. Opponents must be sick of seeing it, these yellow and black waves crashing.

Vito adds another little wrinkle to this too, though, saying: "There's also this spirit of La Rochelle. There's a bit of a history of being a rebellious town (being the site of the last Huguenot rebellion against the French crown). They've pretty much always had a chip on their shoulder. So it kind of makes sense, with the way we have come from nothing and how we are always trying to fight."

In those days, the rebels not only fought off Cardinal Richelieu's forces but fittingly also held off English fleets. The port was the frontline of an ongoing war.

Laterally, the harbour has been transformed into a party zone. Who can forget the scenes after the recent Heineken Cup win, when the team bus was barely visible through a sea of people and fog of flares. And as Mohr explains to us, the Vieux Port has a history of hosting giddy fans.

"When we got promoted in 2010, we didn't know what was going to happen in La Rochelle. So we drove back on the bus from playing in Brive, took our time, had a few beers. We finally arrived back in La Rochelle and there was no one on the streets and we thought that was very weird.

"We got to the harbour at around 2am and saw all those people, there were 25,000 people there they say. We got off the bus and there was nothing left to drink at the harbour. They were out of beers."

It's an incredible anecdote that shows the scenes in the summer were nothing new. But remember: evolution. The team that stands still gets surpassed. Fans need to be grabbed by the attention and shaken, constantly. So Mohr, with his business hat on, adds: "There's not evidence that it's going to stay that way. The budgets increase, the quality of players increase, but it's a community project. So the challenge now is to keep it as a community project but go into a new era that is much more professional, with much more at stake."

Lamb tells us that "the players know they're very lucky to have that type of fanbase" but it's heartening to hear the club still want to offer them more. Out there, so far from their nearest Top 14 rival, Bordeaux-Bègles, they have reared something unique. And in a weird way, everyone wants the club owners to be partying non-stop. To feel rewarded.

Who can blame 'em. The town business is thriving. Embrace the change. RW

> "We got to the harbour at 2am and there were 25,000 people there. There was nothing left to drink"

The day they won it

Leinster **21-24** La Rochelle

LA ROCHELLE were not to be denied after losing the final to Toulouse two seasons ago. But it came down to dramatic, last-gasp heroics for them to win their first European title last May, against Leinster in Marseille.

The Irish giants had led for huge swathes of the game thanks to Johnny Sexton's trusty boot, while Raymond Rhule and Pierre Bourgarit had dotted down for *les Maritimes*. But victory was snatched in the 79th minute as replacement scrum-half Arthur Retière darted over after some prolonged pounding by the forwards.

The joyous scenes as the club's open-top bus passed through the jam-packed harbourside have already passed into legend.

Trophy shot
Delighted fans

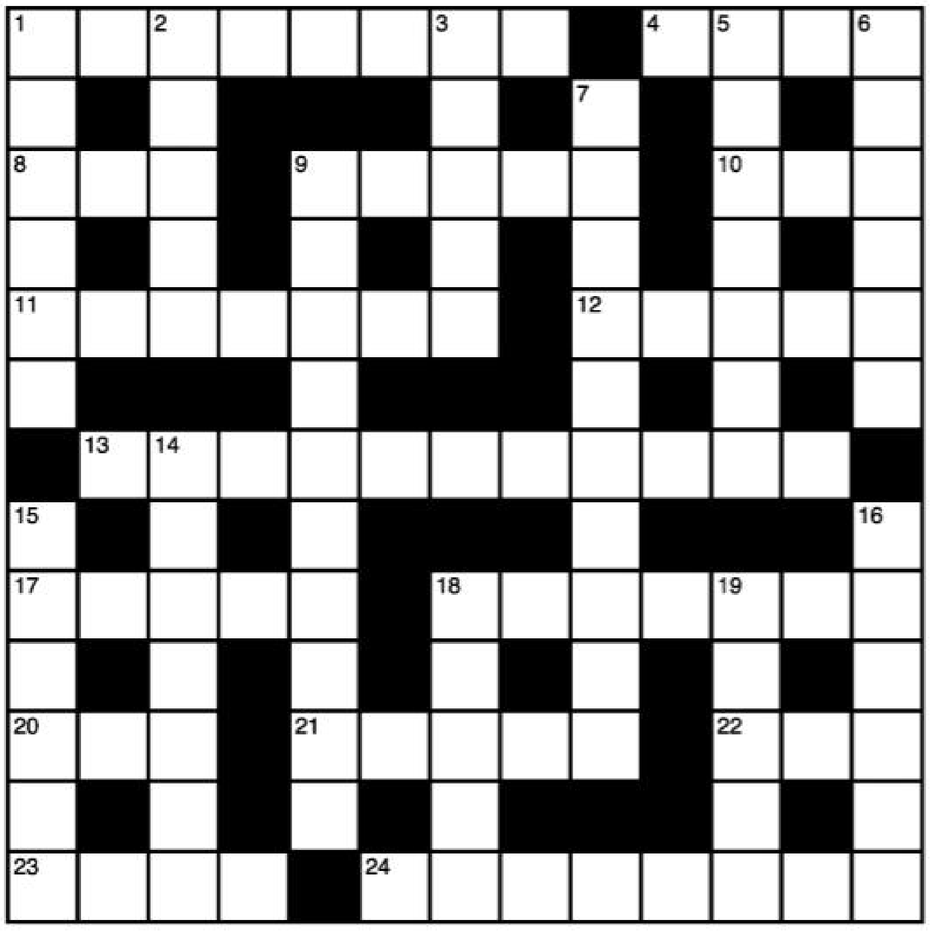
CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Ospreys prop cracks tooth – bam! (3,5)
4 The Kia - - - , London cricket ground that hosts the Sports Book Awards (4)
8 "Jonah Lomu put me on the - - - ," said Mike Catt after the New Zealand legend died in 2015 (3)
9 Maro Itoje would like this country to stage a World Cup, as he told *RW* (5)
10 - - - Cullen, former 18 Down in charge at Leinster (3)
11 Austin Healey acquired a fear of - - - after a traumatic episode as a boy (7)
12 See 18 Across
13 Only Stuart Hogg has scored more tries for Scotland than this 1990 Grand Slam-winning wing (4,7)
17 - - - rugby, version of our sport played in France on a floating pitch (5)
18 And 12 Across. Italy-born Red Roses centre who took up rugby aged ten at Yorkshire club Malton & Norton (7,5)
20 - - - Karpani, Wallaroos prop named Player of the Match v Scotland (3)
21 "I'm massively proud to be from - - - ," said Owen Farrell last year (5)
22 England wing at Gloucester (3)
23 - - - hands – in simple terms, the ability to catch and pass expertly (4)
24 Piece of furniture owned by Shane Williams that has shirts from his career sewn in – it was made by a friend (8)

DOWN

1 Lopeti - - - , ex-Wallabies back-row at Cardiff who now represents Tonga (6)
2 Lionel - - - , Bulls centre who won 14 South Africa caps from 2015-18 (5)
3 Nathan - - - , ex-Scotland lock working as a business development director for Gallagher Insurance (5)
5 Manchester - - - Spartans, gay & inclusive club based in Sale (7)
6 - - - Bank, club founded by London bank staff in 1912 (6)
7 American city in which the All Blacks last year hammered USA 114-14 (10)
9 Saracens coach and ex-Scotland captain who was badly injured when hit by a car whilst out cycling (5,5)
14 One of the many names for the position we usually call fly-half (3-4)
15 Italy women's centre Beatrice Rigoni likes eating these on the pitch (6)
16 Non-rugby job of Wayne Barnes, Conrad Smith and Nick Farr-Jones (6)
18 Animal prowling at Welford Road (5)
19 Asafo - - - , All Blacks hooker (5)



THE WINNER OF THE NOVEMBER CROSSWORD IS
DAVID PETRIE FROM GLASGOW

ACROSS 1. Los Angeles 8. Fiona 9. Medrano 10. Monsoon 11. Alley 12. Le Roux 14. Centre 17. Zebre 19. Eastern 21. Neutral 22. Inner 23. Ethan Roots.
DOWN 2. O'Connor 3. Alamo 4. Gemini 5. Lydiate 6. Small 7. Toby Venner 8. Family zone 13. Unearth 15. Tree nut 16. Merlin 18. Bruce 20. Sligo.

The crossword winner will receive £20. You may choose to use it for new rugby kit, a book or a *Rugby World* subscription (see P32-33 for the latest offer). Closing date for entries is Thursday 29 December and the result will appear in our March 2023 issue. One entry permitted per household; the editor's decision is final. Send your entry, name & address and an email address to: Alan Pearey, 5 Sefton Lane, Meltham, Holmfirth, West Yorkshire, HD9 5JX. The competition is open to all ages. Compiled by Alan Pearey.

DON'T MISS NEXT MONTH

FREE SIX NATIONS MAGAZINE

SIX NATIONS
GREATNESS

PIC Getty Images

Can anyone dethrone reigning champions France in the 2023 Six Nations? We profile leading players in our February issue

PLUS

▼
Best on the planet – see who makes our men's and women's World XVs
▼
The Zimbabwe club saving girls from child marriages
▼
New Year, New Start – how to begin 2023 in full swing

ON SALE WED 28 DECEMBER

FOCUS ON... CLUB RUGBY

On cloud nine
Bristol Aeroplane Company
have overcome recent turbulence

PICS Adam Arnott & Gary Horne Photography

Team of the Month **Bristol Aeroplane Company**

FOUNDED IN 1921 as a works team, Bristol Aeroplane Company have a proud history that was set to go up in smoke. With the juniors and youth sides having already folded, the pandemic took the club to the brink of collapse.

"We've sadly lost a couple of players through suicide, which is why our link to the Bristol Mind charity is so strong. So we've got a togetherness forged by hard times," says Adam Arnott, the club chairman and forwards coach.

"A league reshuffle last season gave us new opponents. The older lads said let's have a big push. We invested all the cash we had into recruitment and kit and managed to recruit some players over the summer – at one point we had 60 people down for Touch Union. Our hashtag became #onemoreseason."

Re-energised, the team racked up nine successive wins to top Counties Four Tribute Gloucestershire South. That run included a record league win, 117-5 against Whitehall 2nds. "When it reached 70, 80-nil, we said, 'Let's stop and go for a beer'. They said, 'Absolutely not, we play the full 80'. You won't see anything on our social media celebrating that win, respect to them."

Respect, too, to men like Tony Hall, who has gladly waived remuneration for coaching Bristol Aeroplane Company. And to stalwarts like captain Alex Wellington, Paul Jones and Justin Collard, front-rowers all. Jones has played "something bananas, like 800 games" for the club and is one of its four loyal sponsors.

Such is the revival in fortunes that for the visit of Yate in early November they fielded a full second XV and turned the day into a double header. "The first time we've done that for years," Arnott says.

"There's now competition for shirts rather than, 'Would anyone mind putting a shirt on?' This renaissance, things coming together, it's just great."

Well done Bristol Aeroplane Company, flying again. If your side should be our Team of the Month, email alan.pearey@futurenet.com with details and a pic.

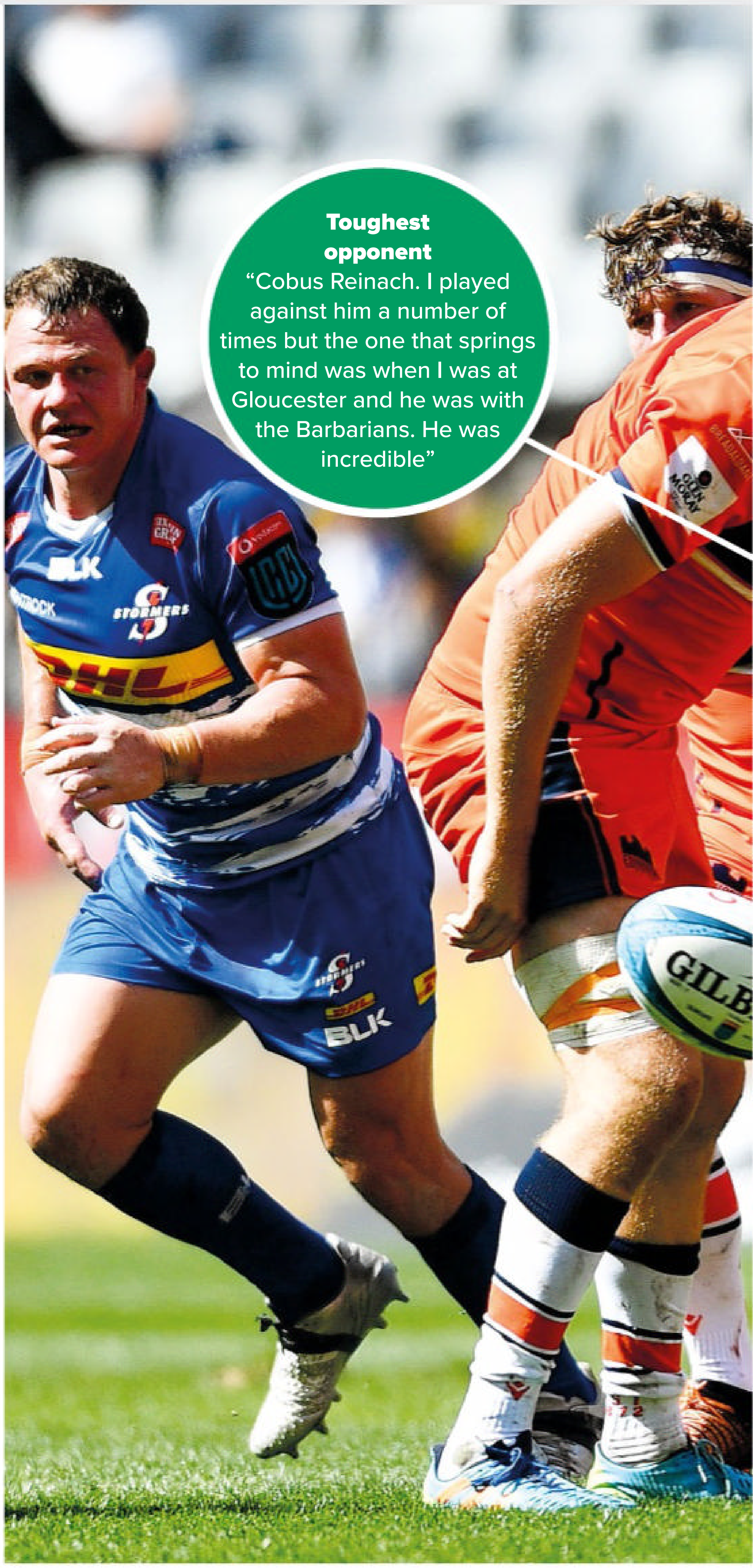
Stalwart hooker
Justin Collard in
an intra-club game

GET IN TOUCH

Email stories and pics to Clubs Editor Michael Austin at **aus231@aol.com** or call 01400 282189. Team of the Month entries to **alan.pearey@futurenet.com**

Vellacott upping the tempo at Edinburgh

The scrum-half tells Tom English why he's landed on his feet in the Scottish capital



Toughest opponent "Cobus Reinach. I played against him a number of times but the one that springs to mind was when I was at Gloucester and he was with the Barbarians. He was incredible"

THERE'S A good reason why Edinburgh fans are so excited whenever the ball goes in the general direction of Ben Vellacott. Normally that means something daring is about to happen. If there's a gap – or a suggestion of a gap – the scrum-half goes for it. When he says "my mindset is all-out attack", he's not exaggerating. Scalded cats have moved slower than him.

From Surrey, with a mum from Peterhead, Vellacott has spent years looking for the kind of scene he now has with Edinburgh. He was with Gloucester from 2016-19 but had Greig Laidlaw and Willi Heinz ahead of him and opportunities were fairly rare. He was with Wasps from 2019-21 and was going well but then he did his ACL and when he recovered, Covid hit.

He joined Edinburgh in 2021. The club was going through change. The attritional style of Richard Cockerill was being replaced by something that was a bit easier on the eye under Mike Blair. When the offer came to move to Scotland, Vellacott jumped at it. With a head coach who was a former Scotland scrum-half and a playing roster packed full of internationals, it was an easy decision. And one that's working out very nicely.

He played so well in his first season that he was capped off the bench in Italy in the 2022 Six Nations. Since then he's been overtaken in the pecking order. Ali Price and Ben White were already there but the re-emergence of George Horne has shunted him backwards.

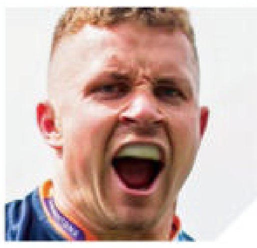
The 27-year-old hasn't given up. There's an old head on those shoulders; battle-hardened and ready to scrap for a spot in Gregor Townsend's thoughts.

"Mine hasn't been the most direct route," he says. "Sometimes you have to go the tough road and that's what I feel I've done. I'm hard-working and I knew that nothing was going to be handed to me on a plate. I felt I was playing well at Gloucester but I was behind Heinz and Laidlaw, so I was always going to struggle. Both of them were class players.

"I thought I'd give myself a new challenge at Wasps but it didn't happen for me. Ever since I was young it's never been plain sailing. I've had setbacks; injuries, not being selected for a county team or whatever. I had to take it in my stride. I'm a big believer that you are in control of your own destiny. If you keep working and believing, it will happen."

It's not just one of them in this adventure in Edinburgh, there are two. His fiancée, Beth, is a big part of why he hit the ground running. She was a police officer in the West Midlands. He says he has to be careful about the things she experienced because the last time he spoke about it he got into a bit of trouble.

Suffice to say that Beth was brave when carrying out her duties. If he moaned a little about a slightly tweaked hamstring in training, he didn't do it for long after hearing about his partner's day. They both loved what they were doing, but Vellacott wasn't doing as much of it as he wanted. Time spent on the periphery of the squad wasn't easy.



FACT FILE

Age 27 (28 Mar 1995)

Born Chertsey, Surrey

Describe your personality Pretty energetic on the field but fairly quiet off it

Favourite film *Point Break* with Keanu Reeves. Surfer dude

Book *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. It's about how making small changes can have big benefits

Surprising fact I was the last try-scorer for London Welsh before they went into administration

Team-mate you'd like to be James Lang because he's always in good form. If the mood is down he will lift it up

Rugby highlight Beating the Sharks in SA last year. Winning the game when nobody thought we could. It was excellent

Person I'd like to meet
"Quade Cooper. I just admire the way he has come through his career in terms of how he has matured and how he's dealt with certain things that happened to him along the way"

Childhood rugby hero
"Benji Marshall, the former New Zealand rugby league player. I watch a lot of NRL and I love the skill level. And I really like the way they turn a match into an event, a family day out"

When he joined Edinburgh they lived apart for 11 months. "She moved up and is now in the British Transport Police. She loves it in Scotland, it's a new challenge, a new area of policing. It was easy moving here because I'm immediately in with 50 or 60 lads who become friends. It's different for partners. Much harder. She's very outgoing, though. Far more than me. She's made a lot of friends.

"She's incredibly supportive. Beth always said that no matter where rugby takes me she'll come, too. Mind you, if there's ever any noise in the house at night she'll always send me down first. I say, 'But you're the police!'. That never works. She's not stupid."

On its best days, Vellacott's partnership with Blair Kinghorn is lovely to watch. Off the field and on they're good mates. "We see the game the same way. We're attacking players, we want to play with tempo, chuck it around and stretch defences. We like to express ourselves.

"What coaches might say about me is that I need to work on my defence, my game management, my kicking game, and that's what I'm trying hard to do. I need to get all of that up to international standard, but it's great being able to work on that stuff in such a good team and with such an intelligent coach in Mike Blair. I'm trying to bring more balance to my game." RW

NEWS ROUND-UP

- **Derby day** The Principality Stadium will host 'Judgement Day' on Saturday 22 April. The Welsh double header hasn't been staged for three years due to Covid, but is back with Scarlets v Dragons (3pm) and Ospreys v Cardiff (5.15pm).

- **Springbok recruit** South Africa prop Steven Kitshoff (below) will join Ulster on a three-year deal after next year's World Cup. He said: "It's clear that Ulster are on an exciting journey, and it's one that I want to be a part of."

PICS Getty Images

- **Cam the man** Cameron Neild has joined Glasgow Warriors until the end of the season. The back-rower had been at Worcester.

- **Grand designs** Connacht have confirmed that construction will start on a high-performance centre and new North Stand at the Sportsground in 2023 as part of phase two of its redevelopment.

"I was in Costa Rica when I heard about Team GB"

Kaleem Barreto tells Alan Dymock about his road to GB Sevens

LOSING YOUR team. It can be a bewildering feeling. And we're not just talking about clubs. In sevens, we have seen England, Scotland and Wales go as individual sides and what remains is GB Sevens. But so close to the recent season, players weren't sure if they had made the cut.

"We finished the Sevens World Cup in South Africa and we expected to find out if we were in the week after," says Kaleem Barreto, the Scottish scrum-half.

"But actually I'd booked some time off in November, in Costa Rica for a couple of weeks. I had one day in Dundee before flying there and it must have been a week later that I got a call at 2am – obviously I wasn't answering that! That was a Wednesday night, but I did hear then from Tony Roques when I was in Costa Rica about Team GB."

We're imagining you in a treehouse in the middle of a rainforest, no reception...

"It's not far off to be honest! But there's always going to be an awkward experience (finding out), in the sense that you're happy but you still have in the back of your mind that not all of your friends are going to be playing with you."

Forget the rainforests, Barreto's road through the elite game hasn't exactly been a cakewalk. Born in the Algarve region of Portugal, the family moved to Scotland where he found rugby, starting at Dundee Eagles. Scouts from Merchiston saw him and began chatting to his family. It didn't work out. His mum looked into scholarships elsewhere. It worked out. He landed at Glenalmond.

Soon enough, academy deals with Glasgow materialised. Game time? He would bounce around a lot – Marr one season, Glasgow Hawks the next, a sevens cap chucked in and then off to Nice, to play in the South of France, which was "certainly an experience!"

So what does that mean, then?

"I grew a lot then in terms of my character and I look back on what was

Eyes alive
Barreto spots a gap for Scotland at the Sevens World Cup

“You can definitely lose your way in French rugby”

probably not the most enjoyable time but one that definitely allowed me to figure out a bit more about myself.”

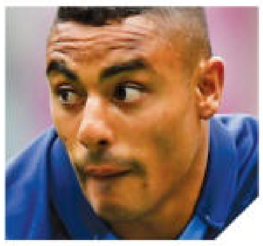
He talks of how easy young pros can have it – in one sense they’re lucky, but maybe long-term unlucky, as you don’t learn how to handle setbacks. He tells us that “you can definitely lose your way in French rugby”, particularly in the Fédérale, isolated, but he figured out how to drive his own standards.

Upon returning to Scotland he found his furrow. Super 6 played a part, as he clocked up the games for Boroughmuir, and then the sevens set-up wanted him.

Now, with the union of the crowds, he is a GB Sevens player and on his ambitions he tells us: “In the half-back position it’s sink or swim, so for me the goal is just to play as much as possible.

“I think it will be different, standing in the tunnel (wearing GB kit). We grew pretty close at the tail-end with Scotland.

“But like always, in sevens things are so whirlwind, anything can happen. It will take a bit of time but hopefully that excitement builds!” RW



FACT FILE

Age 23 (19 Dec 1998)
Born Faro, Portugal
Position Scrum-half
Height 5ft 8in
Weight 12st 11lb
World Series tries 12
Instagram handle @kaleembarretopt

SEVENS GALLERY

Before Hong Kong in November, there was a whirl of sevens action

Irish award
Billy Dardis

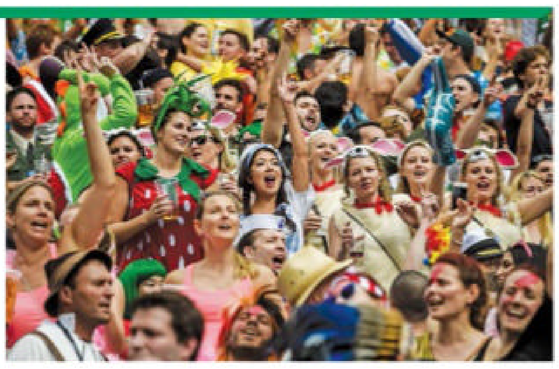
World Cup parade
Fiji men at home

Exhibition match
Japan v Fiji in Tokyo

Sunny promo
Australia on the beach

Set for kick-off
Hong Kong men

SEVENS FACT



Hong Kong will host two World Series legs this season. Early November saw the first Hong Kong Sevens final staged since 2019, won by Australia in front of more than 30,000 fans, and teams will be back there in April too.

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

GRASS ROOTS

Burning bright Tigers centre Josh Durant v Somerton

PIC Peter Edmondson

HUISH TIGERS

What began with a new club being founded at Richard Huish College in Taunton has developed into a productive link with Premiership side Bristol Bears. Now in their second league season, the Tigers, with seven wins in eight Counties Three Somerset South games, were designed to give youngsters the opportunity to play senior rugby in a structured but fun environment.

Chris Heal, head of rugby at the college, is the visionary behind the scheme. A former Taunton fly-half, he said: “We're in our second year of the Bears Academy. We have five players in the U18 senior academy and Harvi Gardner, 16, made his debut in the academy league, playing against Gloucester and Bath. Recently, we had seven of the first-team squad involved against Exeter. We run the partnership to produce future Bears and last year our back-row Costa Galatalis, 6ft 6in and 17st, was the first to be awarded a scholarship.”

WALL FILLER **Barkers' Butts**, of C1 Midlands West (South), have added an eighth player to their prestigious home-grown ‘international wall’ of photographs at their clubhouse in Meriden on the outskirts of Coventry.

Back-row Olivia Constable, a Hartpury College student who's played for England U18, has joined the likes of Jim Hamilton, Neil Back and Tom Wood in achieving national honours. She made her debut in the 64-0 win over Scotland this year.

The club will host a 75th anniversary dinner at the Manor Hotel on 4 February.

CHIN UP Centre Will Simonds, 22, quickly found a new club, albeit in sad circumstances, when Wasps ceased to function. He made a National One debut for **Chinnor** in their 31-21 win at Taunton.

Aylesbury-born and a former England U18 player, Simonds joined Wasps Academy in 2018-19 and progressed to the senior squad the following year.

Chinnor DoR Richard Thorpe said: “It's not only a tough time for Will but for all connected with Wasps. We've welcomed Will, a player who has been in a full-time environment. He can offer us a bit of what we've been missing this season.”

ACTION MAN **Sudbury**'s Shaun Smith is a busy man. At 29, he is the youngest chairman in the club's 97-year history, also plays at first-team level in R1 South-East and helps to coach the boys' U13s and the newly-formed women's side. Smith has been with the Suffolk club since his playing days with the U7s.

He said: “I believe it's something of a unique situation for Sudbury to have a younger chairman still playing. I'm aiming to foster more of a ‘one-club feel’ for the 20 sides housed here.”

YORK TARGET Work has begun on **York**'s 150-seater Wood-Butler Stand at Clifton Park, named in honour of two club stalwarts, but building costs have increased by £60,000 to £200,000. It will replace an old stand that is no longer fit for purpose.

Persimmon Homes have donated £1,000 towards the project and Micky Negri, president of the R1 North-East club, said: “We've made a good start to the fundraising but are ramping up our campaign so that the work can be completed by next September.”

SHORT PASS

Hartlepool have won the Durham Referees Society's Whistlers Trophy for the first time since its inception in 1992. The award sees refs mark the home club on factors ranging from match organisation and kick-off punctuality to changing facilities, pitch marking, team dress and hospitality.

EDEN SPARK **Upper Eden**, of C1 Cumbria, cast aside the disappointment of being denied promotion last spring by league restructuring with seven straight wins. Not only that, they achieved major victories in the Cumbria Cup over hosts Aspatria, a league higher (27-26), and Kendal (29-22).

Upper Eden qualified to meet Penrith in the final, despite sitting two leagues below Kendal, the highest-ranked team in the county in R1 North-West.

Chairman Neil Marston said: “It was the biggest day in our history with a record crowd of 800.” Will Birkbeck, joint captain with twin brother James, said: “It was tremendous. The lads have all been putting in the work at training.”

LOVE FORTY The **Redruth** girls' team is thriving following an initiative to keep young people off the streets and encourage them to take to the pitch. A year ago, the girls' section at the National Two West club had only seven members, but at the last count it was 40 across the U12 and U14 age ranges.

Coaches Shaun Maddern and Andy Hawkey launched the taster sessions and now the target is to run an U16 team and a senior side, giving the Reds a complete women's section.

THREE OF A KIND **Ponteland**, of C1 Durham-Northumberland, are proud to have produced a third international player in Will McCubbin. who has been selected for the England Deaf squad. He will appear in the Sevens World Cup in Argentina next April and follows Hakon Steingrimsen, of Norway, and England's Callum Chick in representing his country.

LOTTO KIT **Rugby Lions** mini-juniors have benefited from new training equipment courtesy of their supporters on Rugby Lotto that was launched three years ago to back local community projects. Rugby balls, cones and tag belts have been provided from funds raised by the C3 Midlands East (South) club to make the game accessible for all children across the borough.

END OF THE ROAD A long uphill battle for survival has reluctantly ended with **Corby**, members of East Midlands 2B, bowing to the inevitable and folding.

Two years ago, their clubhouse roof was torn off by Storm Ciara, causing £30,000-worth of damage. The rising cost of energy bills forced them to close the building last month but they secured some changing facilities briefly before team-raising difficulties ended their existence that began in 1958.

BOURNE TO BE WILD **Bourne** II/vets celebrated long and hard after beating Thorney vets 49-12. It was their first win since March 2020 and Chris Wheeler scored his second try in 27 years with the club. The number of opponents he beat on the way to the line increased as the evening wore on...

FLASH GIFT **Dorchester**, of C1 Southern South, have acquired a stylish electric scoreboard thanks to funding from long-time supporter John Sherry, a former player and vice-president.

Ivybridge, an R1 South-West club, have submitted plans for a proposed extension and a stand to accommodate a growing number of teams. **Brixham**, nearing their 150th anniversary in 2024, have secured the club's future for another 150 years after Torbay Council extended the Astley Park lease for that time span.

PRO INSIGHT An eminent coach dropped in to take a training session at **Seaton Carew**, the C3 Durham-Northumberland club. It was none other than Dave Ellis, the former France defence specialist. He was on his way to work with New Zealand in the Rugby League World Cup but after the tournament he intended to come straight back to Hornby Park!

A spokesman said: "It was amazing to get so much insight from a guy who has worked with the world's best players."

SHORT PASS

Raven Park, Colchester's new ground, finally witnessed a home defeat when Shelford won 34-18 in R1 South-East. It was Colchester's first loss there after eight unbeaten months on an afternoon when the Essex club fielded no fewer than five men's teams.

MAGIC TOUCH Better late than never was **Bradford Salem**'s take on the arrival of player-coach and ex-Bradford Bulls RL luminary Glenn Morrison. He scored the match-winning try, converted by Jake Green, with his only touch of the ball that beat Huddersfield Laund Hill 21-20 in C1 Yorkshire.

"I wasn't even meant to be on the bench but I was because some players were unavailable," he said. "I'd only pitched up 20 minutes before the try and hadn't expected to get on the field."

FORCES EXPANSION The **UK Armed Forces Rugby Union** (UKAF) have announced a multi-year deal with Vodafone Business as lead partner to all UKAF Rugby teams. It covers seniors, U23s, veterans and sevens.

There will be improved kit as well as team opportunities to travel to international competitions. The agreement will also enable UKAF to expand a portfolio of teams to include men's and women's sevens and vets.

LOFTY AMBITIONS Four former **Esher** players in their sixties are cycling more than 1,000 miles, some at a height of 14,000 feet, during a fortnight's ride in November and December.

Simon Catnach, Neil Harper, Ben Robinson and Charlie Beardmore are heading from Viña del Mar in Chile to La Plata, Argentina, to raise money for the mini-juniors at both the English National One club and La Plata, having formed a strong bond with the veterans there.

FIT CLUB New coach Steven Brown is not only aiming to get the **Whitchurch** first team super fit for their ongoing R2 West Midlands League programme but the whole Shropshire club too.

Every parent, supporter and coach, together with ground staff and bar staff from five to 60, are in his remit. When anyone does extra training that is not rugby, cycling, swimming, walking, running and weight training, they earn a point for the day.

The top scorer at the end of each month is being awarded £50. Guess what? The first winner was club president Richard Charmley, who received his cheque from first-team captain Danny Nicholas.

CHAIR LEADERS **Fylde**, high fliers in National Two North, have initiated a Wheelchair Rugby Community Programme. Wheelchair users were invited to a commemorative launch event to take part in a skills-based session.

It was backed by West Coast Crash, an established wheelchair team based at Southport, and Formby District General Hospital, who took on players from the Fylde Community Foundation in a game showcasing the sport.

BEST AT THE FEST A team representing **Kent** won an annual Wooden Spoon tournament, the Vets Fest 22, at National One **Birmingham Moseley** to raise money for vulnerable and disadvantaged children. It featured 700 players from 16 men's and women's vets' teams nationwide.

HRH The Princess Royal greeted Simon Wright, 48, an avid member and supporter of the charity, who played for Kent. He was joined by participants from Dartford and Tunbridge Wells. RW

Hard yards
Hooker Tom Leeson v Newark

NUNEATON OLD EDWARDIANS

Now for the next five years! That's the rich anticipation of Old Eds after the success of the past five campaigns. During that time, they avoided relegation and last season were crowned champions of Midlands Two West (South) alongside their Warwickshire Shield triumph. Head coach Jimmy Gopperth, ex-Wasps and now with Leicester Tigers, is in his sixth year and former Wasps cohorts Craig Hampson, Ashley Johnson and James Gaskell all coached there for a season.

Rob Miller, another past Wasp, is lead coach with Brandon Carter as DoR. He said: "We're in R2 North Midlands, want to establish ourselves and then push for promotion to Level Five. Our side has an average age in the mid-20s with no cliques. Our most eminent player was Steve Savage, our club captain in 1980. He was referee manager for the RFU and brought Jimmy (Gopperth) to the club."

PIC Michael Austin

THE SKILLS AND PIZZAZZ OF THEO McFARLAND

Look out Europe, says Sean Holley, the Saracens forward is coming for you!

THEO McFARLAND has scored some scintillating tries for Saracens but it's his all-round skill-set that sets him apart. There are clearly transferable skills from basketball – which he played for Samoa – and the way in which he uses those skills on the rugby field often leaves the viewer in awe. With the Champions Cup back, fans in Europe are in for a treat.

McFarland's ability to handle the ball is incredible, both one-handed and with two. In the lineout, he combines this ability with a comfortable orientation in the air that is reminiscent of a slam dunk or a tip-off contest in basketball.

At 6ft 6in and 115kg, his power makes him a dangerous ball-carrier in close quarters. Throw in his explosive speed and footwork and the 27-year-old can go toe to toe with backs out wide and draw defenders to exploit space.

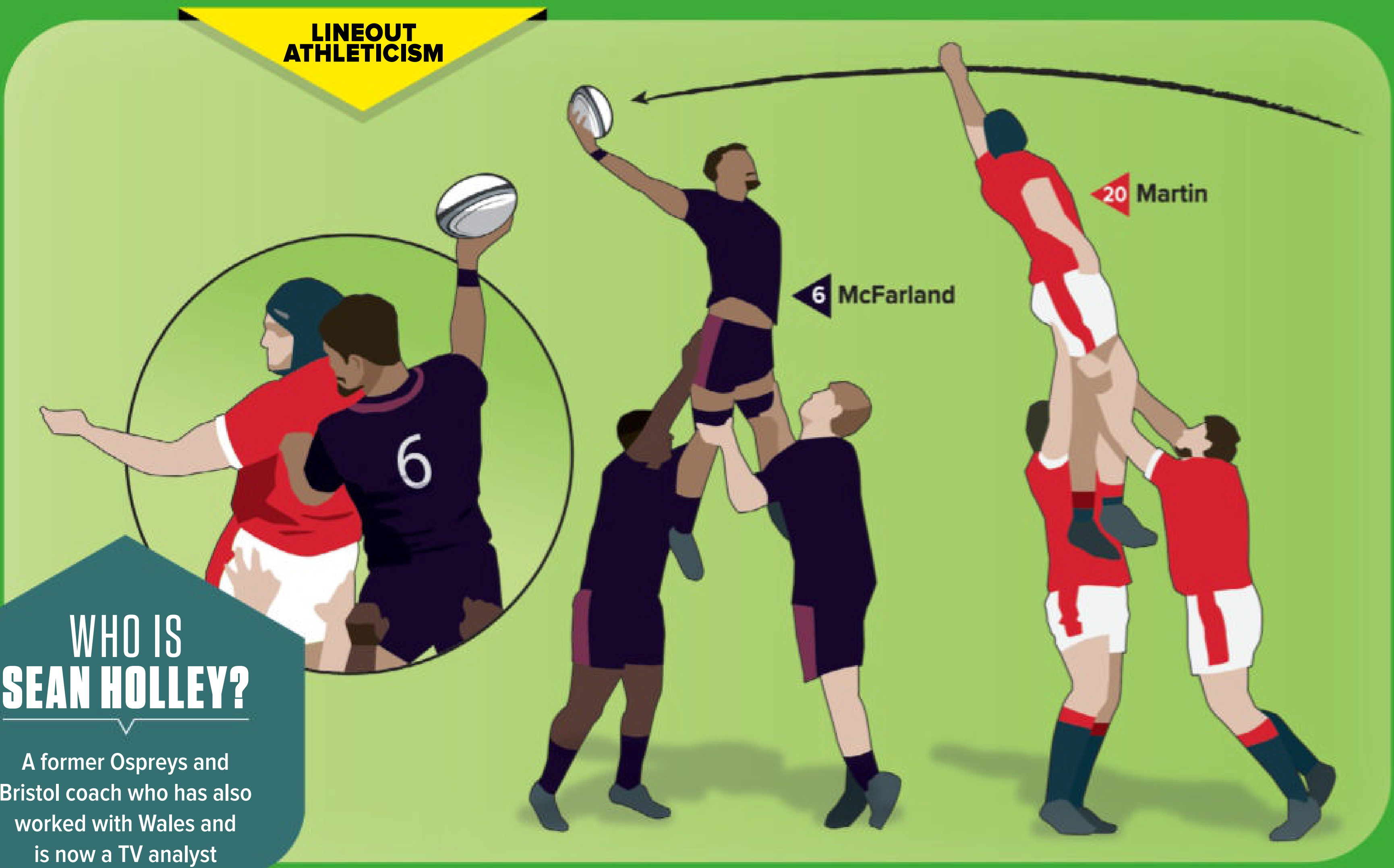
This guy is the real deal. His ability to chase and catch kicks going forward in the air is as good as I've ever seen from a forward. His timing, bravery and accuracy in that department make him a precious commodity. He's used to chase restarts and win the ball back, and as a threat in wide areas from cross-field kicks. To a coach this is pure gold.

I've taken a look at three of McFarland's show-stopping skills from Saracens' Premiership matches...

1

McFarland has clearly learnt quickly about the refined elements of efficient lineout technique in the Premiership. His positioning for the throw is spot-on. He aligns his body straight and linear, and his economy of effort on his jump allows for his lifters to get good purchase on his massive frame. His straight-line jumping pierces the air and he extends his arms fully to give him the best opportunity to catch.

His adjustments to poor throws or to steal opposition ball are unbelievable as he's able to get to the ball with one hand – as illustrated below against Leicester – and skilfully claw the ball to cradle it in or deliver it to his scrum-half.



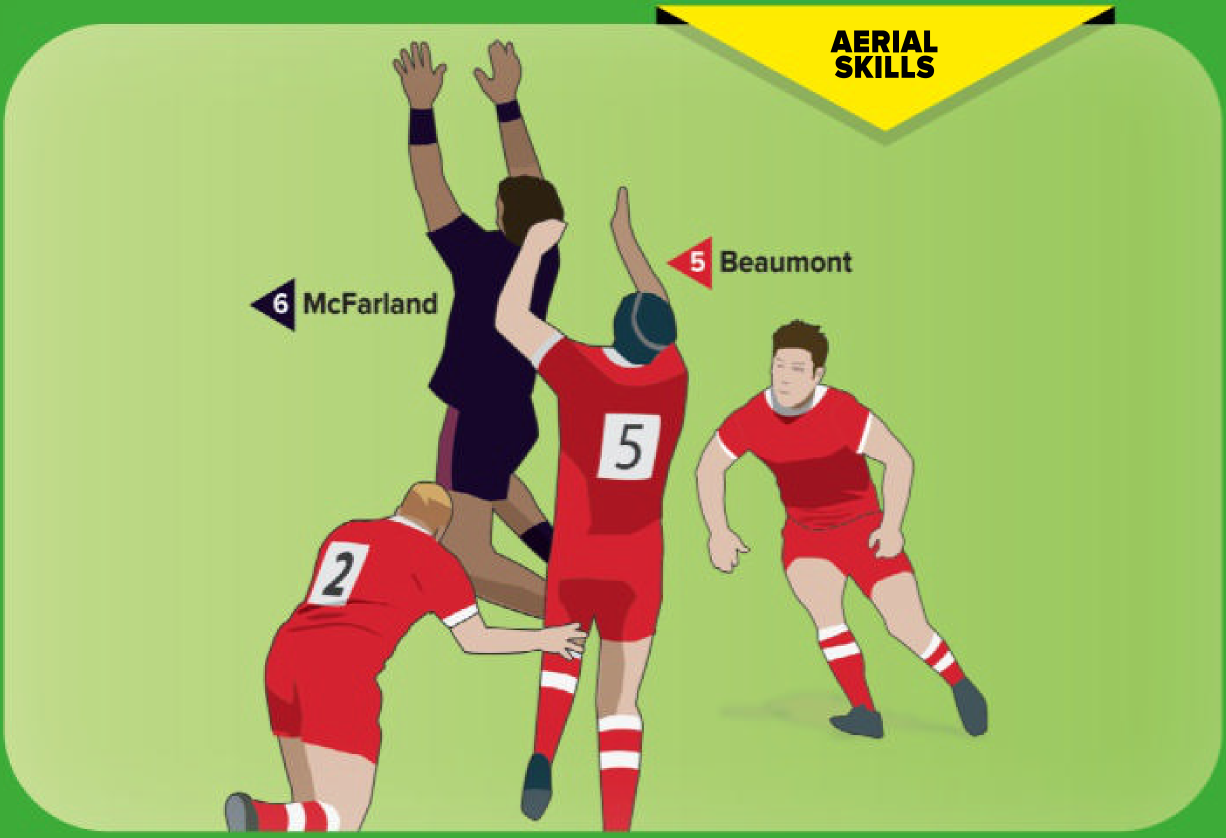
WHO IS SEAN HOLLEY?

A former Ospreys and Bristol coach who has also worked with Wales and is now a TV analyst

2

Not dealing with restarts appropriately after scoring is often called the ‘coach killer’. Add to that an athlete chasing down their own team’s kick with speed, and the ability to time their run and jump to retrieve the ball, and you’ve got a real problem on your hands. That’s what McFarland does for Saracens, as illustrated below against Sale Sharks.

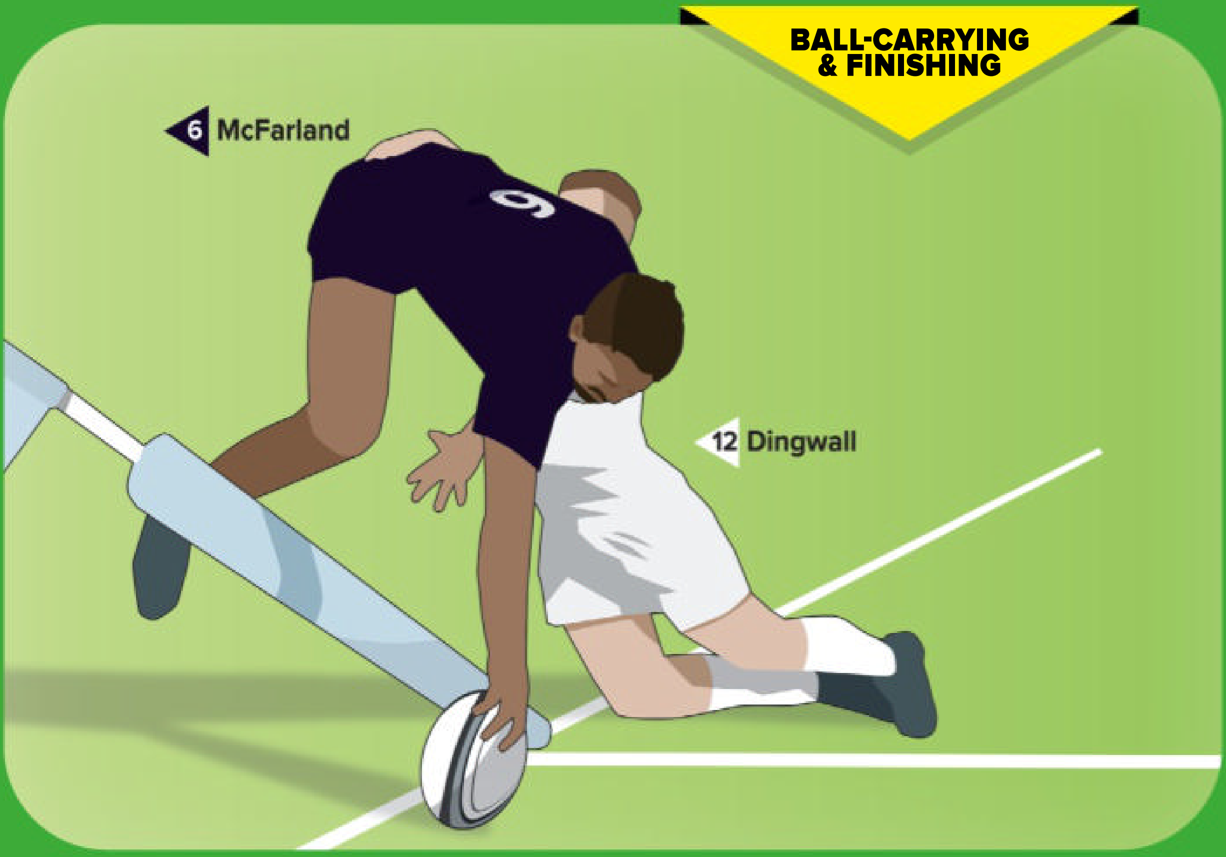
And it’s not just restarts. Having an athlete like this in your team can change your strategy from kicking downfield to adopting more of a contestable kick strategy around box kicks, cross-field kicks and ‘up and unders’.



3

McFarland is an explosive ball-carrier. He has stepping power that allows him to change direction, speed to burst through gaps, and the agility to offload when tackled because his size means he can normally get his hands free. He can carry the ball one-handed with ease, which allows him to use his other for balance or to fend off opponents.

These attributes also give him the dexterity to manipulate his body to score in difficult situations. A perfect example of this was his sensational finish in the corner against Northampton last season (below), voted at Saracens as Try of the Year.



THE INSIDE LINE

Give your team a touch of Theo brio, says Sean Holley

1 Basketball benefit

Do McFarland’s basketball skills help his lineout work? You bet they do! They help with handling, coordination, jumping.

Playing basketball with your back-five forwards will hone their lineout agility skills. For straight-line jumping, work on economy of effort in the jump. The initial spring off the ground with minimal dip from the knees, and arm thrust with high elbows, will get jumpers off the ground quickly and allow lifters to get into their roles more rapidly.

Test the speed by putting one lineout pod against the other and racing to the jump.

2 Eyes on the prize

For aerial work, players must fix their eyes on the ball and yet adjust and scan for traffic to avoid collisions. They need a gauge of the trajectory of the ball, its hang time and the vicinity of the landing spot.

McFarland gets to the take-off point quickly, then shortens his stride pattern to launch on the correct leg. Hands are high as his arms help propel him up and forward. His eyes are now fixed on the ball. He may lean into an opponent for balance – a skill transferable from basketball.

Practise in short spaces with less height to build confidence, allowing the chaser to jump into shields held by defenders.

3 Obstacle to success

Use footwork drills, speed ladders, evading poles, offline running and obstacles to develop steps, swerves, spins, hand-offs and body height.

Create your own ball-carrying ‘rugby obstacle course’, making it fun yet challenging – keep the score! Players love this sort of thing and it will still improve the skills required on the field.

ILLUSTRATION Artlife

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING THIS MONTH...

FIGHT BACK AGAINST FATIGUE

1 MOVE

THE GAME of rugby can be a tough sport, *writes elite nutritionist James Morehen.* Multiple training days, strength training in the gym, physical collisions and high-speed running, all resulting in exercise- and impact-induced muscle damage and soreness.

Research shows how this is sustained all season long and players never really feel "fresh" during the week, instead just cracking on. Acute fatigue associated with training and games is normal and we'd expect this to settle with appropriate recovery after 48 to 72 hours. When training and recovery are balanced, optimal training adaptation and performance can be achieved.

Good recovery is built upon several factors, but the bottom of the pyramid is often nutrition, rest and sleep. Get this right and you will be in a great place.

However, many players get these three basics wrong. Consistently poor sleep, not resting or recovering well enough and consuming poor nutrition day after day can result in many players experiencing acute fatigue, which can then manifest into chronic fatigue.

> **"Good recovery is built upon nutrition, rest and sleep"**

This often feels like a severe lack of energy, motivation or spark to do things. Everything feels like an effort and mentally you may feel a little low. Within the literature this is referred to as 'overtraining syndrome' and appears to be a maladapted response to excessive exercise without adequate rest, resulting in perturbations of multiple body systems (neurological, endocrinologic, immunologic) and mood changes.

My advice would be to treat yourself to an early night, nap when you feel tired, take a day off from the gym and finally consume a good home-cooked meal with lots of salad and vegetables!

Training base
Marcus Smith hard at it

Q "Get a good night's rest" is easier said than done. Any tips on how to go about attaining a good sleep?

A Have you explored cleaning up your 'sleep hygiene'? Some studies show that athletes who attain more sleep recover better, so it's worth looking into, *writes Alan Dymock.*

So try these: maintain a quiet environment, with no light at all, and ensure you keep a consistent room temperature. Don't have bedding that can overheat you. Be strict on a sleep routine: what time you go to bed, wake up, eat. Avoid caffeine and big meals leading up to sleep time. Cut down on 'blue light' from screens on your devices or television just before sleeping.

WORDS Alan Dymock. **PICS** Getty Images

2 FEED

THAI BEEF SALAD

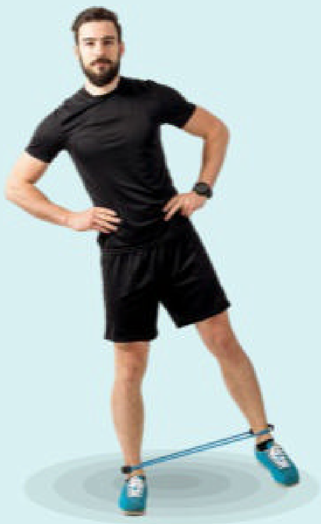
SERVES 2

1 To make the dressing, mix all the ingredients with three tablespoons of water and leave to infuse while you prepare the rest of the dish.
2 Next, cook the quinoa or rice according to the packet instructions.
3 Toss together the quinoa or rice, cucumber, spring onions, beef and mint, then stir in the dressing. Top the salad with chopped peanuts and serve.

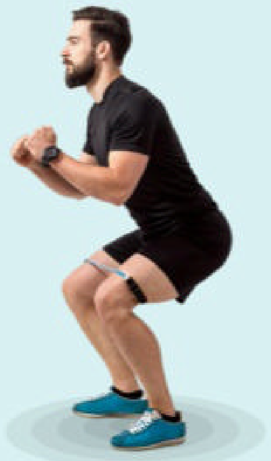
- Juice and zest of 2 limes
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 1 tbsp palm (or caster) sugar
- 2 tbsp fish sauce
- 2 tbsp soy sauce
- 3 tbsp sesame oil
- 2 tsp grated ginger
- 200g sachet of quinoa or rice
- 1 cucumber, halved and sliced, seeds discarded
- 4 spring onions, sliced
- 200g rare-cooked beef, finely sliced
- 1 bunch mint, roughly chopped
- 50g roughly chopped peanuts, to garnish

3 TRAIN STEPS TO SUCCESS

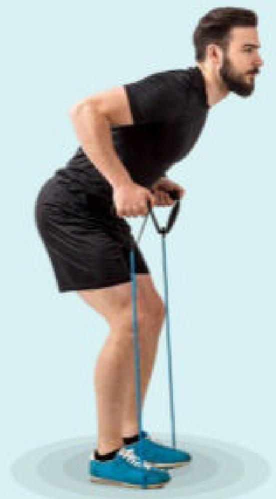
If you're on a lighter or recovery day, you might still want to be active. Why not work with resistance bands...



1 Side leg-lifts
// 3 x 3 REPS EACH SIDE
While planting right foot, push left leg against the band until foot is beyond shoulder. Switch legs.



2 Resisted crab walk
// 3 x 10m REPS EACH SIDE
In a partial squat with band around thighs, walk slowly sideways. Come back the other way.



3 Resistance row
// 3 x 5 REPS
With band looped around feet, leaning forward, row band up towards chest, then return.

HOW TO PERFECT YOUR MAUL

Louis Deacon, the coach behind the Red Roses' driving lineout, gives his top tips

"Use the lineout set-up that gives you the best opportunity to maul from, so the right people in the right places. Have your best jumper with your best lifters, your strongest lifters, because that is what is going to form your base. Throwing to the middle or the back are the best options for mauls."

"Then it's the build – whoever gets on the ball next and the support around the ball. Your lifters and jumper form the wall at the front. You want to form a bit of a wedge to get a strong position to maul from but you also have to give access to the jumper, otherwise you can be penalised for obstruction, so that's the challenge. Then you have the ripper who gets the ball off the jumper and two people either side of them."

"Tightness is key. You need to be tight, not loose, so you don't let anyone through the maul. Then going forward you've got to be together, with all the force going in the same direction. That's where a call like 'And now' comes in to get that togetherness. It's important to keep it as straight and square as possible because any rotation can compromise the maul, so it's about everyone pushing in the same direction."

"Walk-throughs help with clarity, so people know their role and know where they need to go for a particular formation. Even if it's, say, a middle jump, people will likely have to move somewhere else and then jump as part of that lineout, so walk-throughs are a good way to build things up from."

INTERVIEW Sarah Mockford. **PICS** Getty Images

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The Star Letter winner will receive £20 – let us know your views on the game to be in the running

★STAR LETTER★

Where's the love for the tight five?

There was a lot of surprise that Ardie Savea wasn't nominated for World Rugby Men's 15s Player of the Year, but what about the complete absence of tight-five forwards? And that's from both the men's and women's shortlists.

Lock Eben Etzebeth was surely more deserving of a nod than Lukhanyo Am from a South Africa perspective. After all, the centre played in only half the Springboks' Tests due to injury.

The lack of tight-five representation was even more glaring on the women's shortlist. What has been the biggest talking point in women's rugby? The Red Roses' driving maul. And who are the key components in that? The locks and the hooker. None of whom feature.

Where's Amy Cokayne? The hooker who scored a hat-trick in the RWC final and was joint second on the list of top try-scorers. Where's Abbie Ward? The fulcrum of the lineout, the brains and brawn behind that unstoppable maul. She, for me, should not just have been nominated but should have won.

Tight-five forwards have long been overlooked at these awards. There needs to be more love shown to those who do the nitty-gritty. After all, rugby is a game for all.

Kris Johnson, Livingston

High praise
England's Abbie Ward

It's a binding issue

Re *Rugby must slow down breakdown:* You should not be able to enter a ruck unless bound to a team-mate. This would eliminate the flying torpedo approach dangerously taking players out. It would be easier to keep shoulders above hips and be much easier to ref.

Murray Roulston, via Facebook

Steps on the ladder

Ponsonby (Auckland), Villagers (Cape Town) and Randwick (Sydney) would all hold their own in the Premiership. Yet each accepts that their best players must pass through a proper representative stage between club and country. The same applies to the top clubs in Ireland.

How does the RFU and Premiership Rugby think England can get away with having no such stage? They might answer that France has no domestic rep stage, yet internationally that country is a serial underachiever given the quality and quantity of its talent.

Jeff Gage, Bethersden, Kent

Club game
Ponsonby's Wiseguy Faiane

PICS Getty Images

French TV bias

Re *Selective TV coverage in France*: I've definitely noticed that with anything contentious involving a French player, forward pass etc, you get no replays. The other way it's played and played until someone notices.

Martyn Hodge, via Facebook

Ref makes the call

They can do what they want to get the crowd going. But that doesn't change the fact that the referee is the one who calls for a TMO review.

Yes, the ref will inevitably be influenced by the crowd, but more often than not the review only goes to confirm their on-field decisions.

Myke Day, via Facebook

Different attitudes

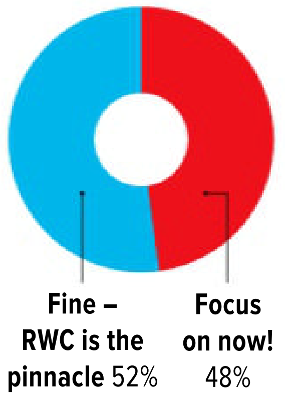
I live in France and coached rugby for ten years. The behaviour of linesmen in amateur matches where sides provide one each is sometimes unbelievable. I once saw a linesman run on and tackle a player heading for a certain try. The behaviour of spectators is likewise hard to reconcile and fights are quite common.

If this is grass-roots rugby, then the manifestation of blinkers and partisanship at higher levels is no surprise at all.

Gary Shanahan, via Facebook

THE RW POLL

Is teams prioritising the World Cup good or bad for Test rugby? Here's how you voted on Twitter...



Players' health comes first

Having just watched a documentary about Steve Thompson's battle with dementia (*Rugby, Dementia and Me*), I was shocked to learn that most of the physical damage he suffered occurred during training sessions – not even in competitive matches.

This subject of head injuries in rugby is of the most vital importance, as we're already hearing that many players have suffered brain damage of one form or another; and what we're seeing in the men's game will be replicated in the

Shades of green
Ireland v South Africa

women's game in the future. Until sports bodies introduce adequate protective measures for players, we must look more intensely at ways to safeguard health.

Although Steve's campaign will help many sportspersons in the future, it's really the rugby authorities who should be leading the way on this issue.

Stephen McCarthy, Glasgow

White is all right

Re *Kit clashes*: Another example of rugby confusing a simple problem. Have the home team change into a predominately white top in the case of a clash. The visitors have priority over their home kit.

Michael Fetch, via Facebook

All hail the Black Ferns

The World Cup final was an epic game and nothing less. All in or nothing, our girls (NZ) have set the bar yet again. It's an entire 80 minutes to win and they definitely used that to the second.

Champions work hard and perform beyond their goals. We are so proud and they have shown the world how a team works together as one. Well deserved, well executed. History is now set in the book of women's rugby. I can't wait to watch the replay, over and over.

Beatrice Waretini Heta, via Facebook

A new women's fan

For someone who's never watched women's rugby, I was pleasantly surprised how amazing it (the final) was. Thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.

Huge congratulations to both sides. But well done Black Ferns. Looking forward to watching more in the future!

Losie Masawekula, via Facebook

Review red cards

The red card in the 18th minute cost England the game. World Rugby has to look at alternative means to penalise a player instead of punishing the team. If a team gets a red card that early, you might as well call it a day. England did exceptionally well to stay in the game.

Riyaad Rhoda, via Facebook

RW says: A lesser punishment may lead to more foul play or cynical acts.

Time to go for gold

A little message to the IRB (now World Rugby): the women's World Cup trophy should be gold in colour; it's not right for it to be silver. What's the consensus on this?

Glenn Sanders, via Facebook

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All smiles
Stacey Fluhler runs in a try against England

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THE SECRET PLAYER

Our former pro provides a unique insight into the game

"French attitudes towards Europe are at an all-time low"

THERE ARE two parts to the question of where English and French sides are at the moment. On paper, the Premiership having their salary cap at a lower level compared to the Top 14 means it should be harder than ever to compete with the big French teams. Bigger cap, the best generation of talent France has seen in 20 or 30 years. And the world's best foreigners play there.

But the second part to this is that even though budgets are more bloated in France, the attitudes towards European competitions are at an all-time low on their shores.

It may have come to a head during Covid, when matches were being postponed and teams were stood down as points were awarded on a case-by-case basis. The French rugby public felt that their teams got shafted at every turn. There's now some ill will towards the Champions Cup and those running the top competition.

There's a word I hate and EPCR are spouting it a lot. "Globalisation, globalisation, globalisation." So they've done a deal where they've captured South African minds, to bring in some commercial sponsorship and big viewing figures. But they've destroyed their product. With these moves, they have taken the joy of European travel and the spark of fan engagement and thrown it out the window.

Let's not forget that the money Top 14 clubs get from Canal+ for TV rights trumps all the other deals combined. And culturally it is held above all else. So to think that they can be bullied or swayed or cajoled into accepting gleefully this new format of European competition is really rather naive.

While there are a few clubs who are all-in for Europe, if you expect the rest to play their best teams against sides like the Sharks in Durban and then come back, jetlagged and bruised, to play, say, Castres at home, you're in for a shock. And if some of these French teams lose game one, I can see loads of them shrugging, as the towel limply gets thrown in and they pick the *espoirs* for their next European fixture.

Eye off the ball
Castres in Europe last season

PIC Inpho

On the flipside, are those less well-funded English sides as worried about going into Europe and then having to face Newcastle or Harlequins away the next week? Well, there's no relegation again for them this season. So if we're all obsessed with the English v French debate, it perversely might work out okay for the English this time round. Of course, on the outside of all this, looking in with a smile is Leinster.

So the Champions Cup this year actually offers a real opportunity for the English because the South African teams are a known quantity and several French teams are very, very close to downing tools. If you can avoid Leinster, this is probably as good a year as any for a team like Saracens or Exeter, if you think that those clubs could enter rebuilding phases in the near future.

At the French teams I've played with in my career, if we weren't looking like we were getting out of our Champions Cup pool after round two, you'd dread the prospect of being sent to the next game. There you are with all the academy kids who never play, alongside the guys needing game time and the players coming off the physio bed.

There is no starker moment than being sent off to Ulster or Leinster away, or down the road to Toulouse as part of a makeshift bomb squad!

The messaging from the coaches in that moment is that "this does not matter". And it is dangerous for your morale because you can go away from home against teams of that quality and easily ship 50 or 60 points. That being said, if you're coming back from injury, you appreciate it because you want the game time; you want to get fit.

But if you know you're not in the coach's plans, and you get sent with all the pups to one of Europe's hardest places to play, it's a real blow to the ol' ego.

In that situation, you are gonna get hooped. There's no other way of putting it. RW

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The International Rugby
The Webb Ellis

RUGBY WORLD

CALENDAR

2023

A celebration of iconic
photographs from men's
Rugby World Cups

JANUARY

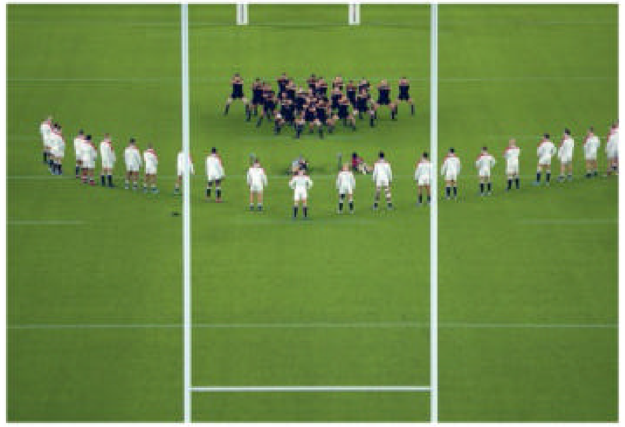
FEBRUARY

MARCH

APRIL

MAY

JUNE



JULY

AUGUST

RUGBY WOR
RUGBY WORLD CUP
UNISYS

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

2023

JANUARY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
26	27	28	29	30	31	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1	2	3	4	5

FEBRUARY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	1	2	3	4	5
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MARCH

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
27	28	1	2	3	4	5
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27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

APRIL

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
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MAY

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JUNE

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
29	30	31	1	2	3	4
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19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
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JULY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
28	27	28	29	30	1	2
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17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

AUGUST

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
31	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10

SEPTEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
28	29	30	31	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8

OCTOBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29
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NOVEMBER

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DECEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
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1	2	3	4	5	6	7

RUGBY WORLD

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Kick-offs are UK & Ireland times. Fixtures correct at time of going to press. Please check before travelling.

FUTURE

Jonah the giant
Lomu scores in New Zealand's 45-29 victory over England in 1995

DECEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
28	29	30	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	1

JANUARY

FEBRUARY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	1	2	3	4	5

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
26	27	28	29	30	31	1 NEW YEAR'S DAY
2 BANK HOLIDAY (UK)	3 BANK HOLIDAY (Scotland)	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1	2	3	4	5

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AUTUMN TESTS SPECIAL
MARO & ARDIE

It's a wrap!
Stephen Ferris ensnares Will Genia as Ireland stun Australia in 2011

JANUARY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
28	27	28	29	30	31	1
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9	10	11	12	13	14	15
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1	2	3	4	5

FEBRUARY

MARCH

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
27	28	1	2	3	4	5
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20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
30	31	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** Wales v Ireland (2.15pm) England v Scotland (4.45pm)	**5** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** Italy v France (3pm)
6 ST BRIGID'S DAY BANK HOLIDAY (Ireland)	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** Ireland v France (2.15pm) Scotland v Wales (4.45pm)	**12** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** England v Italy (3pm)
13	**14** VALENTINE'S DAY	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**
20	**21**	**22**	**23**	**24**	**25** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** Italy v Ireland (2.15pm) Wales v England (4.45pm)	**26** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** France v Scotland (3pm)
27	**28**	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12

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England 2
RUGBY WORLD CUP 2015

Red-letter day
Gareth Davies scores during Wales' defeat of hosts England at RWC 2015

FEBRUARY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12

MARCH

APRIL

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27	28	**1** ST DAVID'S DAY	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
6	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** Italy v Wales (2.15pm) England v France (4.45pm)	**12** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** Scotland v Ireland (3pm)
13	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17** ST PATRICK'S DAY BANK HOLIDAY (Ireland)	**18** **MEN'S SIX NATIONS** Scotland v Italy (12.30pm) France v Wales (2.45pm) Ireland v England (5pm)	**19** MOTHER'S DAY
20	**21**	**22**	**23**	**24**	**25** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** Wales v Ireland (2.15pm) England v Scotland (4.45pm)	**26** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** Italy v France (3pm) BRITISH SUMMER TIME STARTS
27	**28**	**29**	**30**	**31**	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

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Capacity crowd
France and New Zealand compete in the first World Cup final in 1987

MARCH

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
27	28	1	2	3	4	5
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27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

APRIL

MAY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
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8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	1	2	3	4

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27	28	29	30	31	**1** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** Ireland v France (3.15pm) Scotland v Wales (5.30pm)	**2** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** England v Italy (3pm)
3	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7** GOOD FRIDAY	**8**	**9** EASTER SUNDAY
10 EASTER MONDAY	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** Wales v England (2.15pm) Italy v Ireland (4.45pm)	**16** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** France v Scotland (3.15pm)
17	**18**	**19**	**20**	**21**	**22** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** Ireland v England (2.15pm) Scotland v Italy (4.45pm)	**23** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** France v Wales (3.15pm) ST GEORGE'S DAY
24	**25**	**26**	**27**	**28**	**29** **WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS** England v France (1pm) Italy v Wales (3.30pm) Scotland v Ireland (7.30pm)	**30**
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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MARO & ARDIE

Royal appointment
The Queen presents Nick Farr-Jones with the Webb Ellis Cup in 1991

APRIL

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
27	28	29	30	31	1	2
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10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

MAY

JUNE

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1 **BANK HOLIDAY** (UK & Ireland)	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
8	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**
15	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19** **EUROPEAN CHALLENGE CUP** Final (Dublin)	**20** **EUROPEAN CHAMPIONS CUP** Final (Dublin)	**21**
22	**23**	**24**	**25**	**26**	**27** **GALLAGHER PREMIERSHIP** Final (Twickenham) **UNITED RUGBY CHAMPIONSHIP** Final	**28**
29 **BANK HOLIDAY** (UK)	**30**	**31**	1	2	3	4

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Arrow formation
England face the haka prior to their semi-final against the All Blacks in 2019

MAY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
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8	9	10	11	12	13	14
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22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	1	2	3	4

JUNE

JULY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
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10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
29	30	31	1	2	3	4
5 **BANK HOLIDAY** (Ireland)	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18 FATHER'S DAY
19	20	21	22	23	24 **ALLIANZ PREMIER 15s** Final	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9

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Billy Whizzes!
Jason Robinson scores in
England's 2003 win over Australia

JUNE

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	1	2

JULY

AUGUST

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
31	1	2	3	4	5	6
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14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31	1	2	3

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12 **BANK HOLIDAY** (N Ireland)	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

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GUILDFORD AND CREWE
UNISYS
RUGBY WORLD CUP
RUGBY WOR CUP

Boks office
The crowd celebrates
South Africa's 1995 triumph

JULY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
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10	11	12	13	14	15	16
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31	1	2	3	4	5	6

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
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18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	1

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
31	1	2	3	4	5	6
7 **BANK HOLIDAY** (Ire & Scot)	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28 **BANK HOLIDAY** (Eng, NI & Wal)	29	30	31	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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Grand stage
The Stade de France, which will host this year's opener and final, back in 2007

AUGUST

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
31	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31	1	2	3

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
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16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1	2	3	4	5

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
28	29	30	31	**1**	**2**	**3**
4	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** France v New Zealand (8pm)	**9** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Italy v Namibia (noon) Ireland v Romania (2.30pm) Australia v Georgia (5pm) England v Argentina (8pm)	**10** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Japan v Chile (noon) South Africa v Scotland (4.45pm) Wales v Fiji (8pm)
11	**12**	**13**	**14** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** France v Uruguay (8pm)	**15** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** New Zealand v Namibia (8pm)	**16** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Samoa v Chile (2pm) Wales v Final Qualifier (4.45pm) Ireland v Tonga (8pm)	**17** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** South Africa v Romania (2pm) Australia v Fiji (4.45pm) England v Japan (8pm)
18	**19**	**20** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Italy v Uruguay (4.45pm)	**21** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** France v Namibia (8pm)	**22** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Argentina v Samoa (4.45pm)	**23** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Georgia v Final Qualifier (1pm) England v Chile (4.45pm) South Africa v Ireland (8pm)	**24** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Scotland v Tonga (4.45pm) Wales v Australia (8pm)
25	**26**	**27** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Uruguay v Namibia (4.45pm)	**28** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Japan v Samoa (8pm)	**29** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** New Zealand v Italy (8pm)	**30** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Argentina v Chile (2pm) Fiji v Georgia (4.45pm) Scotland v Romania (8pm)	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8

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RUGBY WORLD CUP 2015
England 2015
13
13

Brighton peach
Karne Hesketh scores the winning try as Japan shock South Africa in 2015

SEPTEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
28	29	30	31	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	1

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
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13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	1	2	3

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
25	26	27	28	29	30	**1** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Australia v Final Qualifier (4.45) South Africa v Tonga (8pm)
2	**3**	**4**	**5** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** New Zealand v Uruguay (8pm)	**6** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** France v Italy (8pm)	**7** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Wales v Georgia (2pm) England v Samoa (4.45pm) Ireland v Scotland (8pm)	**8** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Japan v Argentina (noon) Tonga v Romania (4.45pm) Fiji v Final Qualifier (8pm)
9	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Quarter-finals (4pm & 8pm)	**15** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Quarter-finals (4pm & 8pm)
16	**17**	**18**	**19**	**20** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Semi-final (8pm)	**21** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Semi-final (8pm)	**22**
23	**24**	**25**	**26**	**27** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Third-place play-off (8pm)	**28** **RUGBY WORLD CUP** Final (8pm)	**29** BRITISH SUMMER TIME ENDS
30 BANK HOLIDAY (Ireland)	**31** HALLOWEEN	1	2	3	4	5

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French Renaissance
Christophe Dominici leaves Andrew Mehrtens flailing en route to a try in 1999

OCTOBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
25	26	27	28	29	30	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31	1	2	3	4	5

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
27	28	29	30	1	2	3
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18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
30	31	1	2	3	4	5 BONFIRE NIGHT
6	7	8	9	10	11	12 REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30 ST ANDREW'S DAY BANK HOLIDAY (Scotland)	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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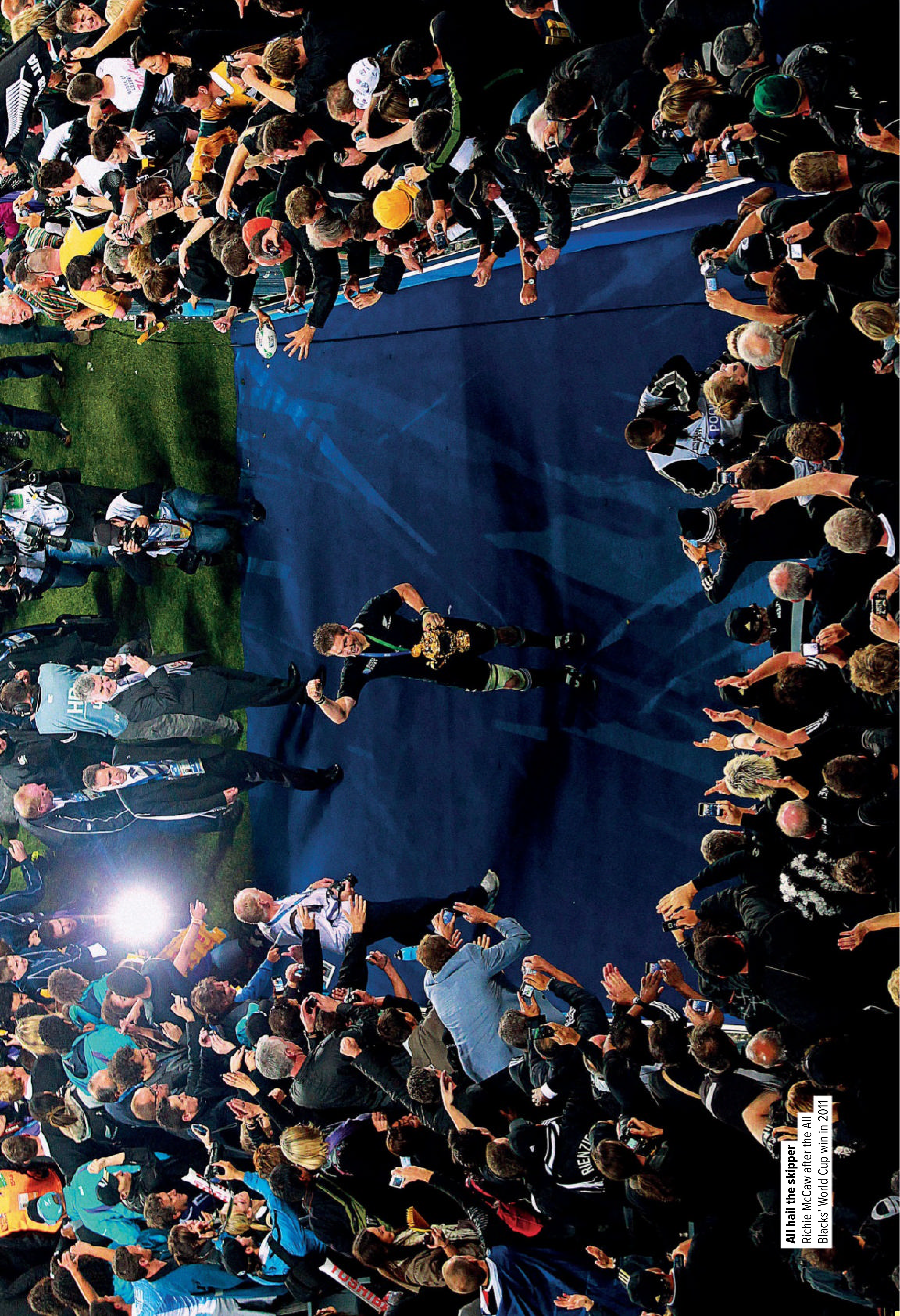

All hail the skipper
Richie McCaw after the All Blacks' World Cup win in 2011

NOVEMBER

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	1	2	3

DECEMBER

JANUARY

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	1	2	3	4

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27	28	29	30	1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24 CHRISTMAS EVE
25 CHRISTMAS DAY	26 BOXING DAY	27	28	29	30	31 NEW YEAR'S EVE
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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Northern lights
England's Martin Johnson and
Jonny Wilkinson after the 2003 win